THE
CRIPPLE
IN
BLACK

E. V. TIMMS

ANGUS &
ROBERTSON

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THE CRIPPLE IN BLACK

SET in Italy and England in the 17th Century, this story of love and hatred, of treachery and vengeance with its hero, a man physically unfitted by nature for his role, ranks highly among historical novels.

The characterization, the love scenes, and the dramatic power of the plot, stamp it as a book to be remembered.

It is the story of a noble character, whose greatness of mind overcame his incapacity of body.

By the same Author

CONFLICT

WHITEHALL

ALICIA DEANE

FAR CARAVAN

MAELSTROM

THE CRIPPLE IN BLACK

by
E. V. TIMMS

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Part One

THE CRIPPLE IN BLACK

CHAPTER ONE

GENOA, named for ages the Superb, impresses itself upon those who visit the city for the first time by the beauty of its aspect and situation. In the year 1658 the majority of travellers, if not using the mule tracks that served as highways for commerce, were carried along the coast of the republic in the feluccas and gondolas that touched at all ports of the gulf. Protected by its walls, the city rises directly from the blue waters of the semi-circular harbour and spreads fan-wise upon the slope of the Ligurian Alps. Its streets are terraced one above the other, and its buildings, both stately and mean, pile tier upon tier in an imposing and picturesque manner.

At one time the pretty harbour wherein the galleys and merchantmen of the republic sheltered was exposed to the fury of great waves rolled forward by the south wind; and the industry and ingenuity of its citizens, centuries ago, was responsible for the erection of the long mole that ranked as one of the engineering feats of the times. This stout sea-wall gave protection to the numerous craft of all maritime nations, and commerce was carried to and from the hub of the republic to the great profit of the merchant princes whose *palazzi*, set like marble gems in their beautiful gardens, made the two magnificent thoroughfares, the Strada Balbi and the Strada Nova, famous throughout Italy, and so throughout the world.

In the year 1658, even as to-day, the important cities of the Italian littoral were trodden by the shod and naked feet of a cosmopolitan population. Genoa was no exception. There, most of the world's tongues cried aloud or whispered low. Song, laugh and sob were to be heard

along the covered Merchants' Walk, in the noisy, meaner streets, so narrow that the overhanging balconies almost shut out the light of day and where two sedan-chairs had barely room to pass, on the busy water-front where proud noblemen walked haughtily past chained slaves and criminals, and even in the dim light and sanctified calm of the numerous churches.

In both the churches of the city and the *palazzi* of the great nobles were treasures of gold, silver, jewels, and priceless works of art in the form of paintings and statuary by famous masters. These precious things were guarded jealously. The nobles relied upon faithful Genoese retainers and mercenaries from Germany and from Corsica, and the churches were protected by the power of reverence and the fear of superstition.

The wealthy nobility of Genoa took pride in lavishing their money upon their magnificent homes and upon the delightful gardens that surrounded these marble edifices, the interiors of which were filled with costly ornaments, furniture, tapestries, and unique objects of art brought from the ends of the earth.

But the reverse side of the canvas was far from being agreeable or pleasant to look upon. Genoa held much that was glorious and also much that was degrading and offensive to the moral and physical welfare of its people. In common with other cities of Europe at this time, Genoa was cursed with the extremes of poverty and wealth, excessive piety, and was spotted with the festering sores of oppression and crime. Indeed, so frequent had been brutal murder and stealthy assassination that the syndics had made it a galley matter for those rash enough to carry a pointed knife. This edict, of course, did not strictly apply to the wealthy and powerful.

By day, law and order were visibly respected, for the living death of the galleys was a deterrent sufficiently menacing to give pause to all except madmen; but at

night, terror and rapine stalked abroad, rowed swiftly along the coast, and slunk stealthily through the black, cramped streets. Against these predatory prowlers the honest citizen protected himself and his family by erecting stout doors that were secured with strong, unyielding bars of wood or iron.

Persons went abroad at night at their own risk, and all too frequently the sound of blows, followed by groans or silence, told those who listened that some man had been attacked and had suffered robbery and violence. Sometimes the shrill scream of a woman rang upon the air, at which other women trembled and paled, and men who sprang to their feet were restrained from going forth by the frantic efforts of their families. Who could tell whether the scream was one of genuine agony or merely the age-old ruse employed to snare a too chivalrous victim?

If, perchance, in the morning the stripped body of the man was found and borne away, the common verdict invariably would be: "It served the fool right. What else could the imbecile expect, seeing that no virtuous woman walks the streets at night?" And then those ones who were wiser than the dead would cross themselves hastily and piously and walk on, their hearts warming to the light of a new day, if not to the equally precious light of charity, pity and mercy.

None knew this better than Guiseppe Balsamo, the cripple whose wealth and enterprise were topics of constant wondering discussion on the harbour fronts and sea lanes of the Mediterranean, for his right leg had been shattered by a blow from a broken oar swung with savage vigour by one of those who had trapped him with the urgent, blood-chilling appeal of a woman's scream. But he had escaped with his life, although doomed by the adventure to limp heavily for the rest of his days. To show his gratitude to God and the Virgin, he had surrendered to the Archbishop of Genoa a portion of the annual profits

from all his ventures on land and sea. Furthermore, he freely forgave the men who had so grievously injured him, to the secret, though great, relief of Romano Mascagni.

He was born in the year 1613 in a lowly hut on the northern slope of the Apennines, within a few miles of the town of Parma. His parents were pious and honest —there were many who were pious but not honest—and, although poor to the point of poverty, were industrious and uncomplaining. To them a strip of lean goat's flesh was a delicious morsel, and a flask of thin, sour wine was ambrosial nectar precious to the last drop. Such occasional luxuries proved to the Balsamos that the Loving Mother did not forget her children however lowly. Guiseppe's father was a muleteer. He perished in one of the blinding blizzards that sometimes swept all life from its icy path. The wolves of the Apennines completed the horrible work begun by the storm, gaunt, ravenous beasts that left little trace of their red feasts. So the youthful Guiseppe bound himself to conditions little better than slavery and procured four mules with which to provide for himself and his mother. Before the crucifix of her beloved rosary he prayed with the fervour and faith of an unspoiled heart. He vowed that, should God bless him and permit him to prosper, he would devote himself and his money to lighten the burdens of those who plod the dark, heavy roads of life. His wits were early sharpened by the grindstone of life, but his bleeding feet and aching back did not harden his heart. By dint of energy and self-denial he prospered.

He was master of three mule trains when his mother died, and within a year of the time when he piled the great rocks high above her grave and fashioned a cross for it, a cross which he kissed and wet with his tears, he had purchased an interest in a felucca that touched at all the ports of the Gulf of Genoa. And so he slowly and cautiously progressed. He acquired interests in many other craft, waiting with infinite patience until they became his

sole property. Time proved that his judgment was sound, and it also enabled him to study the details of this new source of wealth.

But his modesty forbade him to style himself merchant until the day came when his first large vessel, a battered, weather-beaten carrack of two hundred tons burthen, laden with the finest English wool and the products of the East India Company's trade, arrived at Genoa after a safe voyage from London. How he had watched day after day for the first glimpse of her patched sails! How he had prayed that she may safely ride the treacherous English seas and the storm-lashed Atlantic! But his most earnest prayers were for protection against the pirates of Algiers, whose favourite haunt was in the waters of the Balearic Isles and whose practice it was to swoop upon a ship, loot it, burn it if unsuited to their needs, and carry the crew and passengers away to the slave markets. Not even the galleons of Spain and France inspired such fear and anxiety, although their captains relished such opportunities. Guiseppe Balsamo had firm faith in the efficacy and power of prayer, yet a little sigh escaped his lips when at last he saw his ship. Ashamed of such weakness, such doubt, he atoned by burning candles in every church in Genoa and entering upon a self-imposed fast for three days. He praised God and vowed himself to further service, and his friends smiled and his enemies frowned at his earnestness and at his success.

There were in Genoa two persons who held the keys to the inner heart of Guiseppe Balsamo. Of these two, the man Girolamo Panizzi had been with the merchant as friend and companion since the night he was crippled for life. Panizzi was by nature a philosopher who believed firmly in his religion when necessary, in all religions at other times, and most profoundly in what he loosely and ambiguously termed the doctrine of Destiny. This deeply-rooted belief, however, was guarded with zealous secrecy,

for he was a wise man and knew the sharpness of the inquisitional teeth. Of course, the jocund Panizzi realized that God was behind even destiny. By force of circumstances he had been a peripatetic vendor of cheap baubles that delighted the eyes of the women, a sharpener of knives and swords, and a patcher and mender of leather. An avocation of this description, he did not always work, speedily acquaints one with the barbs of adversity. He had felt the sting of those barbs. At times he froze; at times he sweated; sometimes he smiled upon a dish of fish, some good olives, and fairly good bread; sometimes he laughed and ate nothing, not because he was fastidious, but because there was nothing to eat.

His appearance was singular. His head, except for a tuft of dark hair over each ear, was as barren of growth as a dome of polished marble. His brow was broad, high and prominent, a massive sweep of flesh and bone that caused his brown eyes to sink back in their sockets, where they twinkled like far-away lights on a clear night. His nose, flattened at the bridge, swelled lower down into a knob of flesh that seemed to be all nostrils. He cultivated both beard and moustache—at least they grew, for they were usually unkempt and not always overclean. But in this particular he was wont to defend himself by drawing attention to the wandering spiritual fathers who cherished lice. If such a condition was a sign of piety and probity, surely a little wholesome dirt mattered not. He was a tall, broad, powerful man, and, like other philosophers, inclined to indolence.

The presence of Girolamo Panizzi in one of the mean streets of the city was always announced by the swarm of urchins, whose grinning faces and upturned, adoring eyes proclaimed him their idol. A general sigh of regret escaped their youthful lips when the man who sang so funnily, or told such entrancing stories while his stone

twirled or his needle flickered to and fro, passed on to another street.

It was Panizzi's stout staff that saved Balsamo's head and thereby his life, and after the rogues had vanished it was he who placed his humble cellar at the merchant's disposal and then procured with the last of his slender store of money the service of a man who posed as a *chirurgeon* of wide knowledge and reputation. This callous imposter had set the limb in such a crude fashion that even were it again broken and reset it would not improve matters.

The fact that this cheerful stranger should give his all to succour a stranger moved Balsamo deeply. His benefactor had risked his life and limb and had spent all his money so that one unknown to him might first live and then find relief. It was no fault of his that the *chirurgeon* was a hypocrite and, in his way, was as deadly a rascal as the fellow that swung the broken oar. Balsamo gave to Panizzi the love of a brother, and never was he to regret it, for throughout all the storms of passion through which they were destined to pass together his friend never failed him, not even when he knew his soul to be stained and imperilled.

CHAPTER TWO

Two hours before sunset on the last afternoon of September, 1658, William Roland, Earl of Castlehaven, emissary, rather than envoy, of Charles Stuart, exile, cavalier, and bitter enemy of "Oliver the Devil" and his pernicious Roundheads, was closeted with Romano Mascagni. The meeting with the syndic, however, had nothing to do with Royal intrigue. It was a purely personal matter.

The house of this powerful Genoese magistrate was situated in a narrow, tortuous street within a pistol-shot of the Ponte Carignano, the high-arched bridge that links the more elevated portions of the City of Genoa. It was a gloomy habitation, the home of a man whose dark, subtle plots were the subject of whispered comment from the walls of the city to the water-front.

Entrance to the house was gained by stepping from the narrow pavement, up a short flight of well-worn marble slabs in a porch mean and unpretentious, and through a doorway guarded by a heavy door studded with iron and brass. Before any man or woman was admitted, keen eyes scrutinized the visitor through the bars of an iron grille constructed for the purpose.

There were some who said that the front of the house was a monstrous likeness to the sour face of its owner; the pavement and filthy gutter being his moist, dribbling mouth; the tall, narrow porch his thin nose; the two balconies his bushy eyebrows; and the steep roof his hat. But these little comparisons were never repeated to Mascagni, as he was notorious, among other things, for his lack of humour. Besides, he had the unpleasant habit of sending people to the galleys.

It was also whispered cautiously that the magistrate would do anything for money, and he was reputed to be amassing wealth as the result of the shameful though crafty dispensation of his form of justice. Many chained victims of his duplicity, innocent of crime, lived doggedly through the hell of galley and quarry simply to enjoy the ecstasy of exultation when his blood should drip from their steel.

Apparently the guarded conversation of the Earl was of peculiar interest to the syndic, whose black, grey-rimmed eyes, partly hidden by the grizzled hair sprouting above them, gleamed as the carefully-chosen words fell from the Englishman's lips. A broad ray of light escaping through

the heavy, red *portières* pointed spear-like to the massive table of bardiglio marble that stood on the floor of parquetry. The decanter and goblets of Venetian glass glinted in the mellow light.

Mascagni leaned forward in his chair and listened intently to his visitor. One hand caressed his beard, while the other toyed with the slender stem of his goblet. His thin, seamed face, with its sharp, pinched nose and hard, bloodless lips, was a marked contrast to the bold, handsome countenance of his companion. When his lordship ceased speaking there was a minute of silence, during which he experienced a slight uneasiness. For a man that had sold, and would again sell, his soul for money, this Genoese magistrate hesitated overlong for the Earl's peace of mind. But at last Mascagni spoke, and Castlehaven hastily sipped his wine to dissimulate his relief. It was, after all, merely a question of price.

"My lord," the harsh voice had a cutting sound, "you have my sympathy. I agree with you that this merchant prince, this upstart, this Balsamo of mean and lowly origin, is a pompous mountebank in spite of his wealth and religious pretence. He is not liked in Genoa except by the rabble. The filthy worship him because he purchases popularity with cant and generosity—which is one and the same thing. You say this woman he dotes on hates him, despises him? That all is arranged for——"

A fit of shrill, crackling laughter convulsed the Genoese magistrate. He was the merchant's most crafty and implacable enemy. When Balsamo first successfully competed against the enterprise in which he was the hidden though prime mover, he swore he would humble the upstart. Failing in this, he vowed in his heart to be revenged upon him. Balsamo's crippled leg was one result of that vow. But Mascagni had not been able to remove from his path the man who, by honest business and keen competition, had forced him and those associated with him to fill his

barrels with fresh anchovies instead of rotten heads, his casks with sound fish instead of a putrid mass, his skins with an unadulterated wine instead of a watered mixture, his jars with the pure oil of olives instead of a loathsome concoction, and his servants' pockets with money instead of promises.

This furious hate had transformed him into a fiend where Balsamo was concerned. He had waited long and patiently for the opportunity to deliver a crushing blow, but it was not until he became acquainted with the Earl of Castlehaven that he saw that opportunity. Then he saw that which Balsamo, in his blind trust, could not see. By chance it was revealed to him that the lame merchant's happiness was vulnerable and that he could at last deal a stabbing blow that would leave his enemy writhing in agony—not agony of body but of soul. How the dark, esurient heart of the syndic rejoiced! How he planned to contrive and witness Balsamo's torment! How he laughed and chuckled!

"Signor Syndic," interrupted the Earl, casting apprehensive glances about the room, "I pray you to moderate your voice. What if this thing be overheard? What of the pretty woman who was seated in conversation with you, and who almost ran from the room when I appeared? Such beauty hints at a keen ear. She has wit, I vow, and I would gladly do homage to such a pretty dear."

Mascagni's brows lowered and he flashed a sullen, distrustful glance at Castlehaven. Then he shrugged his narrow, bent shoulders and laughed harshly. It was an unpleasant sound.

"We will not discuss her," he said brusquely. "And, as for your fears, my lord, there is naught to fear in this house. It holds many secrets. Why—" here he paused and chuckled, "I could tell of trembling men and lovely women here in this room—" again he paused. The evil smile faded and was replaced by a grim-set look. "This

matter, now. If the City of Genoa extends to you its favour and protection until dawn to-morrow, doubtless you will permit me to distribute your gratitude to those whom I think most deserving of your liberality?"

Mascagni smiled slightly and peered at his visitor over the rim of his goblet. Castlehaven, secretly elated with his success, inclined his head courteously and then rose to his feet. He named a certain sum of money, and the eyes of the syndic glittered with greed and satisfaction.

"Signor, an hour before sunset the money will be here. I have already arranged it. You think the plan discussed will not fail?"

"It will not fail."

"And now, as time is precious and as I have promised my friend Balsamo to be present at his banquet, I pray you pardon this abrupt departure."

"I, also, shall attend the banquet of my dear friend, Guiseppe Balsamo," replied the syndic, his lips curling with sardonic humour, his strange, repellent eyes glowing.

Still smiling, Mascagni rose from his chair and was about to add to his remarks, when upon the calm air there came a slow, deep-toned throbbing of a bell. His lordship was amazed at the effect of the sweet sound upon the syndic. The man seemed to shrink within himself and his face became livid, either with fear or fury, possibly the latter, for he reached and caught up his goblet and sent it crashing to the floor.

"A thousand curses on those bells!" he snarled, his hands trembling, his body quivering. "Bells, bells, bells! Why does he always give bells? To mock me? He has given more bells to more churches than any other man on earth. The air resounds with the pealing of Balsamo's bells. They ring at morning, at noon, and at night, to for ever remind me of—of—not the Angelic Salutation, by God! There is the bell again. Bah! The hypocrite—the liar—the thief!"

The expression on the Earl's face was one of contempt. His eyes were bleak as he turned on his heel and walked from the apartment. Mascagni seemed unaware of the Englishman's departure. His rage had reduced him to something strangely inhuman. He collapsed in his chair, to stare at phantoms that mocked and threatened him. His hand plucked with nervous energy at his loose gown of velvet—a dark, quilted, voluminous thing. The skull-cap, of the same rich material, slipped more and more to one side as his head nodded to the rhythm of the bell.

The Earl was nauseated at such unaccountable and swift terror, and yet he was interested in the transformation. He questioned the trembling man who made haste to unbar the heavy, studded door.

"What is the meaning of your master's strange conduct?" he inquired. "God's Death, fellow! He is monstrous uncivil. Is he a madman?"

"Ah, go quickly, milord," the man replied hastily, darting fearful glances back to where the syndic crouched in his chair. "It is the bell. Afterwards he will be a devil, a fiend without pity or conscience. Please, hurry, milord."

"I have no desire to remain. Faugh! what a sickening performance. And who is that comely wench—the dark-eyed one, whose face reflects the beauty and severity of the Madonna? The one your master so hurriedly banished from the room as I entered?"

"Milord, milord . . . no wench is she," stammered the man. "She is his daughter, and she is as pure as he is vile—a saint, milord. May God and His angels guard her—the Signorina Vittoria. She is the only creature the master shows a kindness. He places her even above his wealth. He adores her——"

"A saint, you say?" Castlehaven laughed derisively. "By the seven gold candlesticks, that is amusing. Pish,

fellow! Thou art a liar. Mascagni's daughter a good woman? Verily, she would be."

"Milord, judge her not by him," was the earnest reply. "But please hurry, milord—do not tarry, I beg, or my back will show the marks of his displeasure."

His lordship wondered at the garrulity of Mascagni's servitor. It must take a great love or a deep hate to put such daring words into the mouth of one who lived in a daily sweat of fear. He descended the steps and entered his sedan-chair, and quickly passed from the oppressive house of the syndic into the sunlight and life of the Strada Nova, the exquisite marble street designed by Rubens.

He gazed with interest at the imposing *palazzi* that lined this famous thoroughfare. He eyed the beautiful gardens and flowing fountains, but more critically did he observe the dainty occupants of other slowly-borne chairs, the pretty dears, as he called them, one and all. His six-months' sojourn had not been without incident and the danger that arises from a nature prone to intrigue; and, even though his reputation as a swordsman had quickly been established, he found that the Genoese husbands and lovers could devise unpleasant methods for the disposal of the gallants. He had to thank his recently-acquired friend, Guiseppe Balsamo, the cripple, the most loved and the most hated among the merchant nobility of Genoa, for preserving his very life. At the time he had been grateful, but that was three long months ago.

Having arrived at the water-front he dismissed his bearers and, turning, looked out over the forest of masts in the harbour formed by the steep, circling hill-slopes that were crowded with buildings and lined with tree-bordered roads. Craft of all description moved or rested upon the shimmering, grey-green water that towards the sun showed a glowing, rippling path of dancing, golden light. The oars of the galleys of the Republic of Genoa, of the

smaller feluccas, of the still smaller gondolas, flashed in the evening sunlight. The air rang with the polygot cries and shouts of a picturesque diversified crowd intent upon the business of making money and the multitudinous affairs of the sea. In the distance, beyond the sheltering mole, a great, sinister-looking, red and black galleass, its long yellow oars plying while its three huge lateen sails filled, passed behind a galleon, the tall masts of which bore square sails that bellied in the wind. The noble ship was heading towards Corsica, its trumpets sounding bravely, its pennants flaunting proudly, its shrouds, forecastle, waist and poop pulsing with the activity of gesticulating, running, climbing, hauling, bellowing men. Before long only its canvas would be seen, a brown speck on a dark-blue horizon.

The Earl smiled as the eager *padroni* of gondolas shouted, manœuvred and fought for his favour; and his manner was confident and buoyantly insolent as he nodded to a swarthy fellow whose lungs of brass sent his deep voice thundering above the shrill cries of his competitors. Looks charged with envy and hatred were directed at the lucky *padrone* by his unsuccessful rivals; eyes were turned in and tongues poked out; fingers were bitten and other pantomimic violence indulged in; and, although the clamour subsided to sullen murmuring, the usual vindictive methods of interference were employed. It was some little time before the gondola fought its way in to the waterlapped steps of stone.

The moment Castlehaven stepped upon the boards of the craft he showed his impatience. His glance became sombre as it rested upon the crimson sash of the *padrone*, who stood with ragged shirt open, and thick, sturdy legs apart as he urged his four rowers to greater effort. He did not like the sash. His left hand rested upon the jewelled hilt of his rapier and the fingers tapped restlessly. His right hand alternately caressed his dark, narrow-pointed beard and small upturned moustache. From the

sash his glance shifted to the mole, with its beacon and brass cannon, thence to the pharos towering high above the point of the promontory that formed the western side of the harbour. But although the Earl's manner betrayed his desire for haste, his voice, quiet and even, did not.

"Faster, you filth," he murmured. He ignored the swift surprise and ill-concealed resentment at the epithet so lightly bestowed upon them as he continued: "If I am not upon the beach of Signor Balsamo before the sun drops behind yonder mountains I will have the syndics make it a galley matter."

The potency of the threat caused those at the oars to exert their strength to the utmost, and before a mile had slipped by under the keel of the heaving gondola their powerful chests were rising and falling as they gulped in the cool air. The pharos were rapidly becoming smaller. Ahead, the narrow beach, the property of Balsamo, whose *palazzo* of marble could be seen on the hill above it, formed a break in the steep rocks that rose precipitately from the sea.

Lord Castlehaven turned his elegant back upon the now surly *padrone* and the half-naked men straining at the oars, and removed the black, broad Flemish beaver hat with its drooping feathers. One white, jewel-encrusted hand steadied him as he allowed the wind from the gulf to ruffle the wealth of curls that partly concealed the wide collar of spotless point-lace. His eyes, as vividly blue as the sea beneath him, stared at the City of Genoa, fast dropping astern. He looked before and about him with the intent interest of one who knows he is looking his last upon a scene and wishes to impress upon his mind its manifold charms and appeals. His mouth, thin and straight above a strong, square chin, again smiled cynically as a thought arose in his mind. The nostrils of his high-bridged nose dilated as his heart beat with swift passion.

"Ah, Genoa! Beautiful, sun-kissed mistress of moun-

tain and sea! There is only one mistress more fair," he whispered. "What a purblind fool the cripple is. But she loathes the fellow, and naturally. I win again. To-night, my fair, beautiful Austrian, the farce of the past few weeks comes to an end. Richard Cromwell? Pish! The dog will not last a month!"

These disconnected and rambling words were prompted by a perfectly-linked chain of thought in the mind of the speaker, a pleasant train of thought that was terminated by the *padrone,* encouraged by the aloofness and indifference of his distinguished passenger, breaking hoarsely into a rhythmic sea chanty to help the swinging oars of his men. The song had an immediate effect upon the four rowers; their muscular bodies, glistening in the evening light with the sweat caused by their labour, seemed to gather new strength from the ditty. They partly rose with the oars, and the light craft cut the leaping sea and sent the spray hissing upon the breeze. A glad light shone in the dark eyes of the singer, and he showed white teeth as he grinned. But Lord Castlehaven was intensely annoyed at the shattering of his reverie, and his cold voice cut the song as a whip cuts the air.

"God's Death, fellow!" he swore bitterly. "Cease that vile croaking!"

The *padrone* was so surprised that for a moment he stood rigid, staring in astonishment at his noble client; then he smiled, for it became clear to him that the English lord was strange to the sea and the ways of seafaring men. He bowed humbly as he murmured:

"Your pardon, milord, but it is a privilege. Some *padroni* use foul oaths, some few a whip. I use a song, and this is the fastest gondola from Nice to Livorno. You will not think me impertinent, but I venture to remind you that this is not England, milord. We are your very humble servants, but not your slaves; nor are we filth, being free men and not galleymen."

Now it was the Earl who stared with surprise. His tall, lithe body was as stiff as amazement and fury could make it; his blue eyes were cold with the menace of death as they deliberately scrutinized the man from the top of his uncovered head to the soles of his naked feet. Never before in all the twenty-six years of his roving, wilful life had he been so rebuked, and the tension of his aristocratic reserve and hauteur almost snapped when he sensed the contempt underlying the words. Slowly the sword scraped against the scabbard as he drew it.

"Sirrah, you are forward and insolent," he said menacingly. "Think you can speak so to a nobleman of England? Dog! We are a different breed to your vinegar-drinking nobles, who cringe to every black and scarlet robe and to every grimy, ear-ringed rascal that carries a blunt knife in his belt. What say you that I should not crop your great ears?"

"Milord, your very humble servant," replied the *padrone* in soft, respectful tones. Nevertheless, his dark eyes were beginning to gleam and his wide, sloping shoulders poised as though for swift action. The gondola, answering his touch upon the helm, swept in towards the beach, the bows shedding spray, the wake a white eddy of seething froth.

"So, you scum!" rasped the Earl, who was now thoroughly aroused, "you would make a mock of me? I had a mind to be lenient, but for that—split me! Taste that——"

But, however skilful his lordship might be with the steel, he found that for once his rare ability was of no avail. Even on firm ground timing and distance are sufficiently difficult, but upon the swaying boards of a gondola such judgment is apt to be faulty. The sharp-pointed blade with which he had determined to pierce the *padrone's* arm, and so let out a little of the vile blood imprisoned therein, penetrated instead the tough wood of the tiller. A lurch of the craft giving weight to the stroke caused the blade

to snap near its point. Doubtless he would have continued to prosecute his nice intention even with a rapier so robbed of its efficiency, but the other, seeing that the English lord was undoubtedly a man of his word, sprang and wrenched it from his hand. The rapier gleamed in the fading light as it fell far out in the sea. And then followed another surprise for the infuriated aristocrat. He found himself in the grip of hands hardened by years of toil.

"This is a damnable outrage," he spluttered, writhing in the grip to the detriment of his rich garments. "This is——"

"This, milord," panted the *padrone,* for the Earl was no weakling, "is where we take a reluctant leave of you. We go no farther—but you do! Yietro . . . Giovanni! To me . . . to me!"

Instantly the two burly rowers near him shipped their oars and sprang to his side.

"It is his hot blood! Cool him, my children," he gasped, whereupon three pairs of incredibly strong hands lifted the fighting, kicking, swearing Castlehaven high in the air.

"Away!" was the command, and the rage-maddened nobleman was flying through the air. The gondola waited until he came to the surface, and then the courteous *padrone* favoured his late passenger with a sweeping bow, in which my lord's plumed hat played a considerable flourish. Then, with flip of the hand, the hat was sent spinning to its owner.

"Should you require a gondola, milord, we shall always be your humble servants—but not your slaves. Please do not forget that." The booming voice dropped to its normal shout as he addressed his men. "To Nice—to Nice, my wolves! Genoa is not for us just yet. We have no desire to rot on the bench of a galley for seven years—eh, my children? To Nice, then, and thank the blessed St. Elmo for the kindly night and a smooth sea. Ninety miles shall

you row without rest, or you shall pull day and night for seven years and be glad to drink your own sweat."

Faces dark with fury glared momentarily at the man tossing the salt water from his curls and eyes. Voices trembling with rage cursed him.

Once his vision was restored, Castlehaven glared back with equal intensity. He was rapidly debating whether he would endeavour to board the craft and take vengeance upon the *padrone* and his crew of scoundrels. But, although he brought blood from bitten lips in his humiliation and swallowed more than one mouthful of salt water, he decided that the odds were too great even for him. He contented himself with breathing maledictions upon their rascally heads as the gondola swept round and headed for the open sea.

"Good-bye, milord," came to his ears as he turned and struck out for the beach. "We are your humble servants—may St. Christopher blast your vitals! Good-bye—you outcast rat!"

"Sink me!" he spluttered furiously in his own tongue as he floundered through the water. "I would have them gibbeted and quartered. I would . . . bah!" which meant that indignation and salt water had combined effectively to prevent further speech.

Some minutes later he emerged from the sea and staggered up the narrow, rough beach. Here he paused to turn and survey the gondola. To him, on the breeze, came faintly the same lilting chanty, and his face assumed a very sour expression as he listened.

"Stab me!" he said grimly, wringing the water from cloak and doublet and picking the strands of seaweed from his long hair. "But that filthy fellow is croaking vilely again. Oh, rot me! I look like something spewed forth by Neptune. I trust that m'dear, the pretty Marie, is with that doting Balsamo. I believe the clod would give his life for her. Faugh! I am chilled, but whether by water or the caprice of women, I know not."

CHAPTER THREE

THE merchant and his friend, Panizzi, stood upon the promontory that overlooked the narrow beach where the Earl of Castlehaven was wringing the salt water from his sodden garments. They had witnessed the encounter between the Englishman and the crew of the gondola from first to last, and, while Balsamo's manner was grave and full of concern for his friend and guest, Panizzi took no pains to conceal or control his delight at the Earl's plight. He bubbled with mirth and the tears of joy rolled down his fat cheeks, while his sides shook with laughter. Again and again he roared with laughter. Balsamo placed one hand on his shoulder and spoke in his quiet manner and tone.

"Restrain your mirth, my Girolamo," he said. "It really is not an occasion for laughter, and I would not offend one who is my guest. Control yourself, my friend."

"Dear friend and master, I will try—try hard," gasped Panizzi, his face almost purple with the visible effort. "But, by my favourite saint——"

"And which is your favourite on this occasion?" interposed Balsamo, gazing somewhat quizzically at the man beside him.

"Why, to be sure, St. Beelzebub, down yonder on the beach," was the quick, irreverent reply. "I have ever maintained that the young English sprig is a limb of the devil."

"Girolamo!" came the mild rebuke. Both men crossed themselves and Panizzi finished the pious act first.

"Well . . . I will say no more," said he. Then he added, as an afterthought: "It is not necessary."

The two men gazed in silence at Castlehaven, who was now winding his way up the steps cut in the rock.

Balsamo was in pensive mood. His companion's persistent dislike for his English friend was just a little disturbing, for he knew Panizzi to be a man of penetration and not given to impulse in either word or deed. Yes, Panizzi's judgment was based upon a personal dislike and not upon his lordship's actual qualities. The whole world acclaims a lover—a lover! Ah, and was not he, too, a lover? Poor Panizzi! In spite of the comfort of his philosophy, he lacked that vital quality; was incapable of appreciating its many charms and blessings. Poor philosopher.

Balsamo dreamed on, listening to the joyful voice of his heart, and with the voice mingled the echo of Marie's soft, sweet tones. The lame merchant's fine, dark eyes were agleam, and the man beside him, catching a glimpse of that inward fire, experienced a sense of perturbation.

Panizzi covertly scrutinized the face and form of the man he called master. Mentally he compared the physical appearance of the merchant with that of the Earl, and unconsciously he pursed his lips, for the comparison was not in favour of his friend, whose frame, undersized and wasted by the early years of toil and scant nourishment, was not improved by his crippled leg. A pity, a thousand pities, that the heart and face of a saint should be part of the physical form of one little better than a dwarf; nay, hardly a dwarf, although the large head on the short trunk gave that impression at first sight. The height and breadth of the brow denoted the power of the brain behind it; the large, dark eyes, set rather widely apart, confirmed the keen intelligence suggested by the brow, and behind the intelligence in those eyes was the equally bright light of sympathy and understanding. The sensitive lips were as full and as soft as the lips of a woman, and were ever ready to smile at the happiness of others. Panizzi's glance swept from Balsamo's face, from the noble brow, the dark, wide eyes, the straight nose, and the partly-hidden lips and

bearded chin, from the uncovered head, with its dark hair falling straight to the shoulders, to the black cloak that fastened at the throat with a jewelled clasp and fell in sable folds to his feet. His limping figure, ever hatless and invariably cloaked, was sufficient to proclaim his identity as far as he could be seen. Panizzi's eyes flashed with momentary anger as suspicious thoughts darted through his brain like winged, whispering imps. He stirred restlessly, for the Englishman was now upon the level ground and was approaching them. He broke the silence.

"See him?" he almost snarled. "As much a coxcombe after his immersion as before it. I vow it would take fire, not water, to quench his arrogance. Guiseppe, my friend, a warning before it is too late! Trust not this offshoot of heretical darkness, this smooth fellow that should have been strangled in his mother's womb."

"Peace, Girolamo," said Balsamo softly. "I am not a child. I read my guest more easily than you do. Away, doubter, and do your enemy a service. See that dry clothes await his coming, for the evening air is chill. Friend, I miss your ready laugh. It is unlike you to be surly. But, as you two men are antipathetic, I send you on this errand of hospitality to give you food for further philosophic thought. Hasten, Girolamo. I will wait here for his lordship."

"I go willingly," replied Panizzi, his eyes still upon Castlehaven. "But remember my words, Guiseppe. This man is not an enemy of mine—no, not of mine."

"Croaker," retorted Balsamo with a laugh. "Throw away that mood, Girolamo. It is too gloomy a garment to wear at to-night's feast. Do not permit Castlehaven's wit to eclipse yours at the table. He has a ready tongue. Lately, Marie laughs at his sallies more than she does at yours. I am not yet sure which of you she finds the more interesting."

"Then you are blind, Guiseppe, and I pray the Virgin

to give you sight," was Panizzi's morose rejoinder. But Balsamo misunderstood him.

"Such conceit, Girolamo. But perhaps she does prefer your nonsense. Perhaps."

Panizzi heaved his ponderous shoulders and one huge fist shot out and plucked at the myrtles that bordered the path. He walked slowly, skirting the carved basin of the great fountain on the middle terrace, mounting higher, until he came to the steps of the portico. Here he paused and, leaning against one of the corinthian columns of marble, looked out and down upon the two men on the lowest terrace.

The *palazzo* of Guiseppe Balsamo had a prospect as fair as any in the republic. To the left, beyond the intervening suburb of St. Petro D'Arena, a fine and fashionable quarter, was the City of Genoa. At this evening hour the ruddy light from the towering pharos sent red rays defiantly over the darkening sea, as though to mock the vanished sun. To the right the rugged spurs of the Ligurian Alps created a patchwork of shadows that gradually deepened from a misty blue to the purple of night, enveloping all but the burning stars in their soft folds. In front, when the wind ceased blowing, the white-topped waves dropped and were still, and the placid sea became a dark mirror that brilliantly reflected the celestial lights above. Here and there, at night, might be seen the lights of near and distant craft, the slightly swaying lights of felucca and gondola, and the steady gleam of the great triple lanterns on the high poops of stately galleons.

At all times was the vista of this fragrant coast entrancing, for each hour of the day brought its change of light and shade: the pale rose-pink of dawn when the translucent sea, the bold, scarred headlands, and the looming mountains were tinted with an opalescent light; the blue and gold of noon when the green and grey groves basked in the warmth of the sun; and the violet shadows of night. Even

in times of wind and storm, when the torn, grey clouds above rushed by in ragged battalions, when dark, mountainous walls of trembling water rolled and roared upon the gleaming, solid, rocky cliffs, filling the air with the reverberant thunder and far-flung spray of the shock, the sense of awe created in the heart of the beholder compelled appreciation of the beauty and majesty of the tumultuous scene.

The grounds in front of the *palazzo* were divided into three terraces, and each terrace was distinguished by its own peculiar design and ornamentation. The imposing edifice itself stood upon a fairly level site that ran back for a short distance and then swept up to the hills. A broad inlaid-marble avenue led from the portico to the wide steps of milk-white Carrara marble that inclined gently to the terrace below. In the centre of the middle terrace was the colossal fountain which took the form of a gigantic bronze Neptune, whose mighty trident, held aloft as though in triumph, shot the arching streams of water into the encircling basin. The third and lowest terrace down on the promontory itself, was clothed with fragrant groves of citrons, pomegranate, myrtle, and cypress trees, interspersed with charming ornamental grotto-work partly hidden in the scented foliage and adorned with figures of brass, bronze, and marble.

Panizzi breathed deeply, but not merely to inhale the clinging perfume of the jasmine. His deep-set eyes were innocent of mirth as they lifted from Balsamo and Castlehaven to the purple horizon. With difficulty he descried the dot which he knew to be the gondola. Presently it merged into the distant shadows, and he became aware that the two men below were moving slowly towards the *palazzo*. Panizzi whispered to himself as he turned:

"With some, hypocrisy is a vice; with others, it is merely a habit. But, it may be that I am mistaken for Guiseppe's faith; his trust is a wonderful thing. How serene must

be the mind where in such sublime confidence dwells. Hang to your faith, your trust, your belief, Guiseppe, for a man without faith is like a dead star lost in the immensity of infinite space."

He crossed the portico with the rolling gait peculiar to him, and, entering the lofty reception hall, strode across the inlaid floor with its soft, deep covering of Teheran rugs to where a huge circular brass gong hung suspended by three massive silver chains. He struck it, and the sonorous peal brought from behind the *portières* on his right a black giant of a man who inclined respectfully before folding muscular arms on his broad, naked chest. Sala the Nubian stood like a statue of polished ebony, his forehead and loins swathed with crimson silk, awaiting the commands of the man before him.

"Sala, the sun of old Dongola hath blackened thy vast bulk. I fear it hath also sapped thy brains. Nubian, where are the lights?" demanded Panizzi as he peered through the gloom.

"Master, they come, they come," replied the giant, carefully choosing the words of a recently-acquired tongue. His voice was astonishingly soft and small for one so huge. "Master, she of the flaming hair, and she of the black, do quarrel. I am but returned from preventing them tearing the eyes from their heads. I had to use my strength. See! The master's one, the one with the flaming hair, hath bitten me on the wrist like a snake——"

"Sala! Thy wits are surely flown. Mother and daughter fighting like cats? Pish, Nubian! Art thou turned liar, and a clumsy one at that?" said Panizzi in amazement.

"Master—see! The flesh is torn. Uhuh! The flaming one is a blood taster." Sala extended an arm for Panizzi's inspection.

"Silence, fool! Wouldst have thy lord overhear such chatter? Dost think he would believe thee? Ah, thy great head shaketh. Softly, now. Tell me of this quarrel."

"I know little," was the reply, barely above a whisper. "I was summoned by the terrified woman. I heard the old one, the black-haired one, screech the name of the master's English lord. Twice she cried his name; twice she flung the word 'fool' at the daughter. Then, because they tore at each other, I felt the sting of the flaming one's teeth. Uhuh! All women are mad," he hissed, his anger prompting him to lengthy speech. Sala was a man of few words.

"If the master heareth this from thy thick lips, Nubian, he will regret not leaving thee on the stinking bench of the slave galley. But because he hath a fancy for thy dark magic, or the miracles that can be no other, thou art here. Be wise, Sala! A bite from a woman's teeth stingeth not like the kiss of the galley whip. But, away! Procure lights, or the coming guests will think this place a tomb. Seek, also, the English lord's sly attendant, and tell him his master is in need of dry clothes. Speedily, now!"

The Nubian, erect and indignant, padded softly away. Panizzi remained motionless, thinking about Sala's report of the quarrel between the two Maries.

"So the little dove has the beak and talons of a hawk, eh?" he muttered. "By the gridiron of St. Lawrence, this thing is beyond me. May the Blessed Lady prevent her from ripping Guiseppe's heart from his breast, for, notwithstanding his pure love, or even his lavish favours, I believe she would strike had she a mind that way. And he would think me the greater fool for telling him. He would chide me in his gentle manner and place his hand upon my shoulder as though I were a child. Castlehaven . . . bah! I must speak in secret with the Nubian, for verily he has the strength of a lion."

The approach of attendants with flaring tapers, and the sound of the voices of Balsamo and Castlehaven nearing the portico, sent Panizzi striding hurriedly in the direction of the tall, arched doors at the end of the great hall. He opened them and passed through.

CHAPTER FOUR

If Panizzi held the silver key, Marie Pleyel toyed with the gold one. Marie was distantly related to Balsamo. Her father was an Austrian, a tailor of Gratz, and her mother a native of Lombardy. The reasons why she and her mother had crept from Gratz to the protection of their rich kinsman were very simple. Pleyel, as though to celebrate his beautiful daughter's nineteenth birthday, had calmly announced to his wife his intention of living with another woman. He did not trouble to return or to inquire as to the lot of the two he had deserted, for the sufficient reason that jealousy, in the form of several feet of steel, cut short his breath and whatever good intention he may have had.

Contrary to the accepted or conventional custom, no storm of grief was aroused in the hearts of mother and daughter at the death of Pleyel. Rather were they conscious of a deep relief, for the handsome voluptuous wife and the still more seductive daughter found themselves free to follow the dictation of natures hot-blooded and passionate. But the virtuous wives of Gratz were soon aroused, and in their wrath they combined for protection. After the fashion of angry women of their time, they made it plain to the predatory pair that they were no longer welcome in the town, by the simple process of emptying refuse from vessels upon their beautiful heads whenever opportunity permitted. Then it was that Marie thought of her kinsman, Guiseppe Balsamo, and his wealth, and she and her amiable mother discussed the possibility of gaining his favour. Even they, in far-off, secluded Gratz, had heard of his amazing rise to wealth and power. And within ten minutes of their first meeting, Marie's quick-eyed mother blessed the circumstance that placed Pleyel beyond the possibility of again troubling them, for she saw,

and Marie saw, the swift leap of the love-light into their rich relation's dark eyes. When at last he took reluctant leave of them, Marie, for the first time in years, discovered warmth in her mother's embrace.

In the luxurious apartment allotted by Balsamo to his betrothed, the two Maries faced each other across a priceless table of skilfully-inlaid marble—said by the merchant to be the work of Domenico Benotti, the master-craftsman responsible for the exquisite ornamentation of the altar in the cathedral of St. Lawrence. But the mother and daughter were not admiring the beauty of the design. Instead, the eyes of the older woman were flashing with fury and with distraction, and the eyes of the younger with bold defiance, rage, and a certain measure of contempt. Dark eyes stared truculently into dark eyes. The head of the mother, crowned with lustrous, dark hair, was stiffly erect; the beautiful head of the daughter, with its wealth of auburn tresses, was held, if anything, a trifle higher in an attitude of conscious mastery. It was evident from the posture of the older woman that she was striving to dominate her daughter by the sheer strength of her will. Indeed, it was the only lever by which she could hope to move the girl, for an appeal or denunciation on moral grounds would be both absurd and impossible, as neither could cast that ancient stone.

Even the tempest of their rage could not wholly conceal the beauty of the two women. Marie, the mother, was a woman of forty, yet so well preserved was she that she had often passed for a sister to the younger woman. Her face was cast in a classical mould, the brow white and noble, the nose straight and well proportioned, the eyes dark and large and expressive of her will, eyes that could glance tenderly, mistily, appealingly, at the object of her regard, or could glare with the hard, calculating stare of the bird of prey.

Marie, of the red-gold hair, was on the threshold of

glorious womanhood, yet in the unguarded moment her very voluptuousness, the cold beauty of her features, the ever-flickering flame that seemed to dance in the depths of her dark eyes, were all indicative of the absence of moral purity, restraint, consideration for others, and the warm human impulses inherent in the natures of virtuous women.

But her self-command ensured few unguarded moments. The busy brain behind the wistful, glancing eyes was the brain of an accomplished actress, analysing the immediate situation, controlling the soft musical cadences of her voice, the posture of her perfectly-moulded form, and adjusting easily and instantly her emotions to the need of the moment. She outshone the youthful beauty of her mother, and accepted with calm indifference the barbed envy and malice that such a pretty mother is apt to dart at her more handsome daughter when she is eclipsed by her in the eyes of individuals and assemblies.

Indeed, Marie accepted passively everything but the thwarting of her desires, and when these were threatened or frustrated, her rage was terrible in its primitive fury.

An hour had passed since Sala the Nubian retired with the blood welling from the bite on his wrist and with anger and deep resentment in his heart, routed, in spite of his strength and savage barbaric aspect, by the spitfire with the blazing eyes and sharp, white teeth. During that time the greater heat of the quarrel between the two women had cooled slightly, leaving vindictiveness to smoulder in their hearts, and the winged darts of mutual recrimination to keep the embers slowly stirring. Never before had they clashed with such bitterness, such force, and the combat, for it was truly a battle of wills, left both trembling, wild of eye, and with bosoms rising and falling breathlessly.

"And what is to become of me?" the mother was asking, her voice hard and shrill, her eyes fixed upon the face of her daughter. "Of all the things that the mad blood of the Pleyels ever prompted, this sudden passion of yours is

surely the craziest. Girl, you have no thought for me? Am I to be left to starve, to wander the streets of the city like a wanton at the mercy of every drunken libertine? Is it to this fate you would condemn your own mother?"

"Starve?" Marie's eyes narrowed as she shrugged her white shoulders. "You are hysterical because I choose to order my life as it best suits me. Besides, do you think I would be content to be merely his mistress? He has vowed to marry me, and I will see to it that he does. I shall be the Countess of Castlehaven, in spite of your jealousy and in spite of the limping fool who spends his time on his knees instead of in my company. As a lover Guiseppe is amusing, but as a husband he would be death itself."

"Oh, Holy Mother! Listen to her! My jealousy, you say?" panted the dark-haired Marie. "It is a wonder that the good priest that confesses you does not give you a terrible penance. But, no doubt, you cheat even your confessor."

"Think you I reveal more than you do?" was the sneering reply. Marie tossed her head in a manner that infuriated her mother and then turned her back upon her. "Ah, the good priest, indeed! Yes; there are good priests, but are they not the old ones? What cares the priest whether you are jealous of me or not, or whether I have one or fifty lovers so long as I do not commit the more heinous sin of eating a pigeon on Saturday? You, to talk of confession and the priest! I remember a certain Capuchin in Gratz who once gave you absolution. But he required until dawn and then snored as loudly as any man."

"That is a lie!" The reply was almost a scream from the mother's twisted lips. Her form trembled, and rage again distorted her features. "The snores you heard were those of that pig, Pleyel, your father. May the fiend take his soul!"

"Oh, yes; a lie. Well, let it rest at that. But moderate

your voice, or that black beast, Sala, will return. It matters not what you say. My mind is made up. Castlehaven is mine. Guiseppe—ugh! Imagine it."

"You will not betray your kinsman, for I will tell him of your perfidy," was the heated reply.

"Ah!" breathed Marie, turning and peering with furious eyes at her mother. "And then I shall have something to say to Guiseppe, and well you know that I can do with him as I will. To him a hair of my head is more precious than all of you—than a thousand like you. A moment ago you called me fool. Wait!"

She walked to where a crystal jewel casket, enclosed in a network of filigreed gold, rested upon a massive table of silver. She opened it and drew forth a necklace of emeralds that blazed with light as she toyed with it. Then, watching craftily the face of her mother, she returned to the table and tossed the jewels carelessly upon the marble surface. The older woman's eyes did not leave the gems, for she coveted them.

"Guiseppe's gift to me," continued Marie, her full, red lips curved cynically. "They once adorned the proud neck of a Mogul queen. Each gem is worth a king's ransom, and the necklace itself is beyond price. There, my dear mother, is some slight compensation for your disappointment. When I am the Countess of Castlehaven you shall wear them before the eyes of the English aristocracy."

"But . . . but . . ." the mother whispered, lifting the jewels and running them through her fingers, "there is no aristocracy in England. What of that monster, Cromwell, and his demons that torture those of the true church? How can you ever be a countess in a land that is ruled by tinkers, yokels, shopkeepers, and blood-thirsty soldiers—and all of them miserable heretics? Is Castlehaven not an outcast? Where is his king? Is not Charles himself an exile? If the Earl were a Frenchman, now, or even a gloomy Spaniard. But he is nothing but a titled outlaw, and yet

you talk foolishly of being his countess and of the aristocracy of England. Child, where are your brains?"

"You have never before underrated my intelligence, even though you have spoken contemptuously of my beauty," Marie retorted dryly. "Cromwell is dead! All Europe is lighting fires and ringing bells at the passing of the archfiend. Guiseppe's informant told him that it is not only the children that are dancing in the streets of Madrid, Paris, Antwerp, and Rome. The royal refugee, Charles Stuart, will again see England, and this time as king."

"You think that handsome rake, Castlehaven, will marry you?"

"He will."

"To me he seems a dangerous man—oh, yes, you may laugh! But if not married immediately how will you guard against him during the days and nights of travel?"

For the moment Marie had no ready answer. She had asked herself the same question again and again, and her inability to reply had given her moments of disquiet. But there was no need for her mother to know that her hopes were tinged with fear. She laughed easily as she replied.

"Trust me, my dear mother. I do not propose to throw away all this"—she turned and waved a dainty hand airily —"for shadows and sorrow. I have beauty and I have wit —if only a woman's wit. You need not fear for me. Castlehaven, like the rest, will be like wax in my hands."

"I am still doubtful——"

"That beautiful necklace, now. Are not the gems superb?"

"Ah, yes; they are truly magnificent. They burn and flash with the green fire of unimagined romance, of untasted love. They heat the blood, I vow!"

"And will they not cause the mother of the Countess of Castlehaven to be envied by the women of London? Will they not attract the glances of men to the throat they encircle? But who knows! They might yet nestle amongst

the jewels of some other noble English family, for with me away from your side, your looks, your art, and that scintillating necklace may bring even a prince of the blood to your feet."

There was a long pause, and during the silence the brain of each woman was busy calculating the chances and estimating the risks. The thought of a prince of the blood, or any other kind of prince prostrate at her mother's feet, caused Marie to suppress rising mirth. She had difficulty in banishing the sneer from her lips and the contempt from her eyes. But what formed an absurd and impossible picture for the daughter was not at all unimaginable or improbable to the mother, and already, in her mind's eye, she saw the crouching form of the royal suppliant, listened to the avowal of his love, and even felt the princely kiss upon her hand. When she finally raised the necklace and clasped it about her throat the daughter breathed a sigh of relief. The fight was won, the greatest obstruction removed, and the way was clear for the prosecution of her plan.

"My dear child, I accept your gift. But you must promise me one thing——"

"What must I promise you?" Marie interrupted impatiently.

"That you will take me with you. I could not face Guiseppe alone. With you gone and the necklace in my possession, even the blind Guiseppe might suddenly receive his sight. You must, at least, allow me to accompany you as far as Paris."

"Paris! Do you think us crazy? Do you imagine we should be so foolish as to travel overland?"

Marie paused and considered in silence, ignoring the anger that again sparkled in her mother's eyes at her hesitation. But at last she nodded.

"It is agreed," she said. "Castlehaven will have to endure your presence, and you can protect me—if necessary. Are you satisfied? My patience is exhausted.

Another objection, and I go in spite of you and without you—and with the necklace."

"My child, you should be pleased at my concern for your future. A mother is naturally anxious about her daughter's welfare. But tell me. How do I look?"

"Oh, your dark hair sets them off well. They suit you," was the terse, grudging admission.

"Yes, somehow I always thought they would. But they never enhanced your looks, my dear. Your skin, to a critical eye, has a faint yellowish tinge, and the reflected light from these emeralds always gave you a deathly appearance."

The mother's tone was very dry and cutting. It was plain that certain of her daughter's remarks still rankled.

"A skin can easily be yellow to a prejudiced eye, so your opinion has no weight or value. Listen! Yes; someone is approaching. Away with the emeralds, for it is Guiseppe himself. His dragging foot proclaims him as surely as the bell does a goat. Ah, he has struck the gong and is waiting. Is he not humble? Is he not maddening? Another man in his position would have indulged a natural masculine curiosity. But, Guiseppe! Bah! He makes me sick. What is the need to be a woman when a dull-witted saint like that is the master of the house!"

"I will admit him——"

"Oh, no! I will do so. He loves to see me with my hair about my shoulders like a shower of gold, and it amuses me to see the gleam in his eyes. That man does not know his own mind. I cannot understand how such a dolt amassed all this wealth. Oh, but he is a fool!"

"Ah, yes; truly he is a fool in some things," the mother murmured in agreement as she replaced the emeralds in the casket. "But, thank the Virgin, it is you he loves—not me! It is a fortunate thing for women that there are fools who cannot read the secrets of their hearts—and more fortunate still that there are fools who can."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Ah, it is my Guiseppe himself," Marie called gaily over her shoulder to her mother. The lofty doors, carved and massive, opened easily and silently to reveal Balsamo standing in characteristic attitude and dress on the threshold. His dark eyes glowed with love that approached adoration as they gazed at his betrothed. He bowed courteously first to her and then to her mother, who stood smiling enigmatically at the foot of the great canopied, silk-covered bed.

"Guiseppe," continued Marie, advancing slowly with all the art of her voluptuous nature in her sensual walk; a wanton light glittering in her glowing eyes, a light that Balsamo imagined to be love-created, a pure light. Her voice was low and caressing with the artful inflection of the born coquette. "I have been waiting and longing for you. And now have you no word of love for me? No fond embrace with which to greet me? Ah, Guiseppe, sometimes I think I do not please you."

"You must not think that, Marie, my beloved," was the gentle reply. He placed an arm round her shoulders, and, drawing her to him, kissed the golden-red cascade of hair with an air of reverence. "You must not imagine such a thing, for when I am not with you, a second is an eternity to me. But I see your dear mother observing us. She smiles. Doubtless our love reminds her of her own youthful days. I am sure it does, for love is the elixir of life to all good women, and a mother such as yours must be gratified to know that you have given to me the greatest happiness it is possible for man to receive. Marie, you tremble! Is your sweet heart so affected by my words?"

Marie had difficulty in not laughing outright at the man who looked up at her so earnestly as he limped by her side. To her, his love was intensely puerile, so lacking in virility,

a childish, unnatural thing that irritated even while it amused her. His manner of address, eager yet restrained, the solemnity with which he invested his words, his quaint way of glancing up and sideways at her, exasperated her to such an extent that she was filled with a malicious desire to wound him by telling him how ridiculous he appeared in her eyes. Her mother saw that the girl was laughing at him, and, knowing his sensitive nature, and dreading a possible breach at this stage, quickly obtained his attention. Her manner was adulatory and her words were honey-sweet.

"Guiseppe, our dear protector," she said before Marie could reply, "your words of love, so sincere, so kindly, would soften even a harsh-natured woman. Our Marie is little more than a child, and such devotion, such generosity and love as you have bestowed upon her has made a deep and lasting impression upon her heart. We both bless you, Guiseppe, and ever pray for you. Marie, compose yourself, my child. Guiseppe, she does not mean to shrink from your embrace. It is but the natural timidity of innocence."

"Ah, but beauty, innocence, and purity are the divine attributes of the Virgin Mother," he replied, smiling first at one and then at the other. "If she has endowed my Marie with such qualities, how blessed am I. Truly my prayers have been answered, my privations and sufferings rewarded. I am well content."

"Then you do love me so much, Guiseppe?" whispered Marie, her eyes downcast so that the long lashes might be seen to advantage, her expression and attitude meek and maidenly, her robe, as though by accident, drawn tightly about her to reveal the outline of her superb form, her hair so arranged that the light from the candelabrum showed the powdered flesh beneath.

"Marie, to define my love is beyond my power. I can only hope to show something of its depth by placing all that

I have in your dainty hands. Words are but bubbles that please, even fascinate, and then pass away. For you I would do anything. Your voice to me is sweeter than the harp, your presence a balm and comfort to my soul. Without you, life would now be a dark and empty thing—a thought that brings terror to my mind and leaves it numb. No, child; words cannot express my love, at least, no clumsy words of mine, for I have not the gift of song, of praise, of delineating human emotions, of etching with everlasting words the desires of the heart. But I am content to serve you and to protect you as long as my life shall last. I shall ever be faithful to you, Marie, as I know you will be to me."

For the moment Marie's ready wit had no response, and her restless eyes saw that her mother's face had assumed an unnatural pallor. But her heart, plated with the steel of selfishness, did not, could not, appreciate her betrothed's sincerity. Her quick glance flashed back to his face, and, to her mother's horror, she deliberately shrugged his arm from her shoulder and then burst into shrill laughter. Guiseppe Balsamo looked at her for a little while in silence, obviously at a loss to comprehend why his words should cause mirth. Ignoring them both and still laughing, she walked to a divan and threw herself down upon it. Her attitude was one of careless abandon. Deliberately she revealed the lines of her exquisite beauty. Keenly she watched for its effect upon him. Her mother stood rigidly, her hands clasping and unclasping nervously while she looked from one to the other. Balsamo limped to where the girl was lying and bent his serious, inquiring gaze upon her.

"Marie, why do you laugh?" he asked softly.

"Laugh!" echoed she, peering up at him with half-closed eyes. The other Marie trembled at the mockery in her daughter's voice. "I laugh because I am happy, Guiseppe. Is not such a love as yours enough to make

any woman laugh—with joy? Sit beside me. You are such a comfort, and I love to have you near me. I delight to hear you talk of love, Guiseppe, for you are such a wonderful—talker."

Balsamo did not doubt her.

"Ah, you are happy? May God bless you, my sweet love," he said fervently, tenderly raising her hand to his lips. "To make you happy is my desire. But I cannot tarry longer, for even now the gondolas are approaching, and as His Grace the Lord Archbishop of Genoa has consented to honour us with his illustrious presence I must be ready to receive him. Besides, you have yet to begin your toilet, and I must not hinder you. Marie, all Genoa is paying tribute to your wonderful beauty and graciousness, and none more so than myself. But I must away."

With difficulty he bent and kissed her, and then, with a smile and a nod to the silent, watchful mother, he limped across the apartment. At the door he again bowed to the two women.

Not until the tapping of his ebony stick and the sound of his hesitant footsteps had died away did either of the two women stir. Then, as though unable to restrain herself longer, Marie again laughed, but this time harshly and with an angry tone. Springing from the divan, she limped to and fro across the floor in imitation of Balsamo. Her mother made haste to close the doors, fearful lest spying eyes and listening ears should bear away the tale of her daughter's shameful conduct. Marie suddenly stopped playing the cripple and turned on her mother with blazing eyes.

"Oh, but I am sick of that whining Guiseppe!" she cried passionately, tearing at her hair and at the thin, filmy robe of silk that covered her. "All he ever does is to prate about his love and about God. He gives me prayers! Imagine it! What do I want with prayers? What do I want with him? I want a man's love—a man's embrace—

a man's passion—not the hideous sound of that tapping stick and that dragging foot for ever haunting my ears. He drives me mad. He is such a canting hypocrite that he will not admit even to himself that I mean no more to him than any woman means to a man."

"Marie! Do not scream! You will bring——"

"Scream . . . ! I could shriek, but whether with rage or with laughter, I know not," was the hysterical reply. She tossed her head, jerking the long hair back from her shoulders. "But this I know! If ever Marie Pleyel be brought to bed it will not be by him. I would rather suffer the torments of Purgatory, the flames of——"

"Marie . . . stop!" commanded her mother, terrified and trembling. "Surely you rave, girl! Have done!"

"Rave? Not I. Why should I rave over a cripple? Poor fool! Would you be flattered at the prospect of such a husband? Such a grotesque chatterer? But I read the scorn for him in your eyes. Then why should I, who am more beautiful than you, welcome him as such?"

"You . . . ? More beautiful than I am?" Marie's mother first showed amazement and then deep resentment at such an impossible statement. Her outraged pride conquered even her cupidity. "Why, those words prove you rave. The only thing in your favour, vain girl, is youth—and we have all had that. You never had my beauty and never will. The impudence of you—you red-headed fury. If I had red hair and a turned-up nose I would not mention the word beauty. I vow you will end by being brought to bed by the devil, and then who will save you? I had a mind to tell Guiseppe all—emeralds or no emeralds!"

"Then, my jealous mother, you would have nothing, for he would send us both forth to fare for ourselves. Another thing! My hair is not red! It is golden. Oh, tell him if you must—but you won't. Indeed you won't. I know you too well. Oh, close the doors and cease wagging your

tongue. Before God, I know not which is the greater nuisance—you or the cripple. Close the doors and summon the women. After all, it is our last night here."

CHAPTER SIX

GUISEPPE BALSAMO was human enough to be troubled in mind as the result of a woman's laugh, and as he walked slowly along the wide corridor his head was bowed in thought. Usually he delighted to pause and examine one or more of the curiosities and objects of art with which the broad passage was furnished. Each piece of modern or medieval armour, each curved scimitar, each steel-studded shield or habit of some long dead eastern potentate, had its peculiar interest and appeal. But as he returned from Marie's bower they failed to attract his eyes. He was conscious only of the fact that Marie, for some reason obscure to him, was displeased.

Like many other men who have given all their thoughts and energies to the task of climbing the steep, treacherous slope of success, he knew little of the complex character of women, and his judgment of them was largely influenced by the memory and teaching of his pious mother. She had firmly implanted in the heart of her son a veneration for all women even as she had endeavoured to create in him a love for all men. Those early lessons and kindly admonitions had made a lasting impression upon his mind and heart.

But that laugh! That shrinking from his embrace! The vision of Marie reclining upon the divan, her lips curved with sardonic laughter, her eyes half-hidden yet bright with disdain, had engraved itself upon his brain. That mocking note had almost stilled his heart. Was there, then, he asked himself, some truth in the sly

innuendoes, or were they merely the customary embellishments of falsehood? Could there be foundation for Panizzi's warning? Castlehaven . . . ? No! It was too monstrous for credence. It was too cruel and unjust to his beloved. Whatever had induced her momentary impatience had nothing to do with his English guest. It was he himself that was at fault. But in what way? Was it his manner or his person that had given offence? Never before had she turned from him like that.

His shadow, thrown behind him as he limped along, veered round as he passed beneath the candelabrum. It fell dark and grotesque in front of him. His downcast eyes were arrested by the irregularity of its limping movement, and suddenly he paused. The knuckles of his hand became white as he gripped his stick, for painful thoughts entered his mind. He remained tense, staring down before him. Was that the cause of her displeasure? He trembled. Then a faint sigh of relief escaped his lips, for his mind had admitted just a little of the poison that drips from the tongues of whisperers. Although a little wounded at her childish prejudice, his heart again rejoiced. So she was young enough to pout at a cripple! But then it was not to be wondered at, for her beauty commanded the attention and flattery of handsome men. Adulation was lavished upon her by an admiring masculine world, so no doubt there were times when her natural vanity glanced askance at a crippled limb. Impressionable child! He laughed softly, soundlessly. Apart from that little lover's gesture of disdain, he was sure in his heart that she was his and his alone. The evil, he told himself, was not in the laughing lips and sparkling eyes of his promised bride, but in the dank fictile minds of those who are ever ready to see evil in a woman's smile and in the heart of the recipient.

He would have passed into his apartment, his mind still deep in meditation, but for the sound of guarded, low-

pitched voices. He paused to listen, for the peculiar earnestness, the vibrant intensity of the cautious tones, were singularly impressive. He had no difficulty in recognizing the speakers, and his features showed surprise that Panizzi should engage in such a secretive conversation with Sala the Nubian. Their forms were hidden behind the Arras tapestry that divided the corridor. He wondered that they had not heard him approaching, and then he realized that the thick Persian carpet that stretched the length of the gallery had effectively silenced all sound. Again he made to turn away, but a sentence from Panizzi caused him to catch his breath and incline in a listening attitude. He stood as though carved from stone, his shoulders bent, his hands clasped over the knob of his stick, his dark hair spread over the collar of the sable cloak that fell straight and motionless to the jewelled shoes upon his feet. Panizzi was saying:

"Choke that Antæus, my Hercules! Lift him high in the air and throttle him. Sala, thy mighty strength was fated for this thing. Wring the Englishman's neck and throw him to the fishes! But beware of thy tongue, lest a stroke of a knife deprive thee of it. Act speedily and without fear. The English lord will meet thee upon the promontory at the point where the waves, far down, wash the sharp, broken rocks. I will see to that. So, between us, we will do away with this man that is like the hidden adder. Ah, but we know him."

"But the master—" began Sala.

"Suspects nothing, and will never know," Panizzi interrupted. "Dost hesitate, black beast that thou art? Dost shrink in cowardly fear when thy master's happiness depends upon the grip of thy fingers? I declare, Nubian, thy caution makes me vomit! Now what sayest thou?" Panizzi's tone betrayed his impatience and disgust.

"I will break him as the elephant breaks the rotten

stick," declared Sala. "I will stamp him flat, my master. I have killed men before this. This one will be easy. But the master?"

Panizzi frowned at the Nubian's persistence. That the giant would kill the Earl of Castlehaven he did not doubt. The murder light already gleamed in the rolling, dark eyes of the African; the thick lips lifted slightly, revealed strong, white teeth. Panizzi rubbed his bald pate furiously, a habit of his when annoyed.

"Now, verily, thou art an impudent, inquisitive dog!" he spat out angrily. " Since when hast thou been permitted to question? Sala, the desert gave thee strength—not wit. Use thy gift and attempt not the other, or the exercise will leave thee weaker than Delilah did Samson. That crepuscular mind of thine is not constituted to endure the light of reason. It is for thee to act, not think. Much less is it for thee to discuss such matters with thy betters. Naught is left for thee but to obey. And God pity thee if thy great, ape-like arms fail thee! The Englishman will have thee spitted and writhing upon his sword in the twinkling of an eye. He is skilled with the steel. Oh, Lord! What, savage, is troubling thy thick skull now?"

" But the master says, 'Sala, thou shalt not kill!' He is teaching me the new religion. It is different to that of the Arabs that said, 'Kill and pray, and blessed be the name of Mohammed the prophet of Allah.' How, then, can I follow the new religion? Uhuh! The path is dark before me."

"Sala, thou hast promised," said Panizzi sternly.

" Yes, master. I learned to kill before I learned to pray," answered Sala, grinning slightly and taking a deep breath into his vast chest.

"Then it is done!" Panizzi heaved a sigh of relief. "Now harken to me, Sala. The English lord was the cause of the blood that flowed from thy wrist. Hast thou forgotten that?"

"By the wings of Al Borak! That will I never forget," the Nubian replied grimly.

"It is well. Now I shall see to it that . . . Sala! Listen to me! What, in God's name, art thou gaping at now? Nubian, I vow——"

"The master," grunted Sala, his thick lips apart and the whites of his eyes showing. He held his arms outstretched before him and bowed low. In this posture he remained, while Panizzi whirled round and stared into the stern eyes of Balsamo, who had parted the tapestries and now stood gazing, first at one and then at the other.

"Guiseppe . . . you heard?" Panizzi whispered, recoiling.

"I did. It was God's will," said the merchant shortly.

"Ah, doubtless you think me a monster," Panizzi hastened to say. "But let me defend myself, Guiseppe——"

"I could never think you a monster, Girolamo," Balsamo interposed, his hand uplifted to stay the other's eloquence. "But I know you to be misguided. And I would have no man destroy his soul for me. Girolamo, this cruel thing you plot is a stain upon my good name and yours. Have you forgotten that Castlehaven is my guest? Have you failed to remember that my roof gives him sanctuary, my board hospitality, and my heart friendship? Can you not realize that were the Nubian here to snap the thread of the Englishman's life he would also snap the thread of my honour? What madness is this that has seized your brain? And what has the Earl done to merit death? Surely that icarian imagination of yours has flown away with your good sense? At the very least, Girolamo, your conduct is impertinent, and many would name you more harshly and with justice."

"Guiseppe, hear me. Blame not the Nubian. He is but a tool in this thing."

"Be reassured, Girolamo. We are all largely as we were

born. I do not blame him. Think you I expect the Nubian to strike off the chains of his instincts and colour, and clothe himself in the garments of the white mind? Who am I to punish any man? God alone is privileged, for to Him alone all is known. Sala, begone! And think no more of this evil thing! I command thee to show to my guest the consideration and courtesy that is his simple due. Girolamo, you will accompany me to my room."

"Your room, Guiseppe?"

"Yes. We shall ask God's forgiveness for this terrible thing. The shadow of this contemplated crime must not come with us into the banquet-chamber. Were we not absolved, then indeed should I see the grinning figure of death standing behind the chair of my guest. Death must not be present at the feast, Girolamo. Come!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

BALSAMO led the way to where a portion of the wall, arched and recessed, was covered with white silk draperies. Excepting the quarters of the domestics, there was no other room in the *palazzo* so simply furnished as the private apartment of the lame merchant. In the guest-chambers, the galleries, the reception and banqueting-halls, the ornaments, draperies and furniture were costly and magnificent. But the chamber of Balsamo was severe and plain in comparison, and contained only those articles of furniture essential to his comfort and dignity. His limping figure inclined forward humbly as he stepped upon the narrow, cushion-covered dais that extended out from the covered recess. His dark eyes were filled with a pure, holy light as he solemnly blessed himself and his lips moved in silent prayer. Having finished the prayer, he reverently drew the silk curtains and revealed the life-size figure of Christ

upon the cross. Then he turned to Panizzi, who had fallen to his knees, and his voice was very gentle.

"In this world of death and passion, how blessed are the memories that bring sweet content to the soul. Ah, Girolamo, we should strive to be natural and kindly, for to be a saint is as unnatural to man as to be a fiend. Girolamo, in our Blessed Lord alone is redemption. Ask Him for that forgiveness which is not mine to bestow—the true pardon of God."

Panizzi prayed most earnestly. He would do anything to please the beloved cripple beside him. Then he rose and quietly left the room. Balsamo still knelt before the crucified Christ.

An hour passed swiftly, and Panizzi made his way to the banquet-chamber. Although he knew in his heart that Balsamo's fall from happiness was imminent, he was disturbed because its incidence was hidden from him. By his friend's command he must remove from his mind all doubt, must accept Castlehaven as one above suspicion, and by neither word nor deed manifest the distrust and impatience that welled in his heart. And to Panizzi the merchant's word was law, even as it was to all who acknowledged him as master.

The erstwhile knife-grinder and leather-mender felt that, owing to his ignorance of the English tongue, he was powerless to discover the Earl's secret. True, Balsamo could speak the language fairly well, but the peculiar English idioms, the figurative phrases, the strange oath-sprinkled slang that his lordship freely employed, often baffled the merchant and convinced him that the intricacies of the tongue would be for ever beyond his full understanding. Yet he was destined to learn it thoroughly.

To Panizzi the heretical Castlehaven was a child of the pit. Was not the Englishman able to converse fluently in several tongues? That in itself might point at an education beyond the ordinary, yet it also savoured of the

uncanny, for Englishmen were notoriously dull and were without the gift of tongues. Then, again, all women seemed to experience a sense of fascination when in his presence. What man, unless baptized in the bottomless pit by Lucifer himself, could before the very eyes of husbands and lovers turn the heads and steal the hearts of their womenfolk? And where was there another man that could so ably defend himself with sword and poniard against the vengeance of outraged and jealous men?

Panizzi was certain that, in addition to a wrist of steel, his lordship possessed a head of iron and a heart of ice. His wrist had been proved. His head had also stood the test. Panizzi remembered an occasion when, out of mischief and vanity, he had challenged the Englishman to compete with him, flagon against flagon. Hours later the philosopher had turned pale and his stomach, heaving with the wine within, had revolted when the devilish foreigner had calmly and smilingly poured oil upon some salad and ate it with apparent relish.

That Castlehaven's heart was of ice was demonstrated within a month of his arrival in Genoa. He had supplanted a certain husband, and his dalliance with the woman and the manner in which he had subsequently made her a widow had created a storm of comment. The woman was weak and the husband a bully—but, well, there it was. That the Earl should have affairs concerned no one; that he should kill his rival was also something everyone understood; but that he should then publicly insult the woman by ignoring her before the eyes of an interested assembly was too much. The man was inhuman. Panizzi quite failed to understand Balsamo's toleration of such a being, for, although leniency may be charitable, the merchant's stern morality condemned such practices.

Because of all these irritating matters, Panizzi was morose and far from agreeable as he sat at the long table and glanced from Castlehaven to Marie and then to

Balsamo. He ignored the guests, was inattentive to the point of rudeness to the vivacious women beside him, and seemed quite unconcerned as to the quantity or the quality of the food and wine before him. The partly-picked leg of a goose, a tasty though large morsel, was firmly clasped in his fist, and with it he drummed upon the surface of the table beside his plate of silver, quite oblivious of the fact that his action was responsible for the smear of fat that dulled the polish beneath. His eyes, his thoughts and his entire interest were drawn to the three at the head of the table as the compass-needle is irresistibly drawn to the north. His ears were strained to catch every syllable uttered by them, and he endeavoured to shut out the other sounds of laughter, music and gay conversation. He, who was rapidly acquiring a reputation as a droll fellow, a wit dry but keen, sat glaring like the veriest sullen clod. His sheet anchor of ready philosophy was dragging slowly yet surely before the rising gale of passion, the dark, lowering centre of which even now encircled the three that sat feasting and laughing at the end of the sumptuously-laden table.

The banquet was in Marie's honour, and it was Balsamo's intention to announce to the assembled guests the date of his marriage to her. This he had not yet done, for he had decided to first allow the food and wine to create the necessary harmony and mellowness essential for the proper reception of such an important announcement.

The chamber wherein Balsamo and his twenty guests were feasting was fragrant with the incense burning in the four censers suspended from tripods of brass. These were placed one in each corner of the spacious apartment. The dome above was supported by twelve tall, slender, marble columns, six on each side of the long table, and was panelled and painted by some dead and forgotten artist to represent typical bacchanalian revelry. A gigantic tinted glass candelabrum was suspended from the centre of the

dome, which seemed to gather the light and reflect it as a golden glow upon the gold and silver plate, the goblets and decanters, and the other decorative crystal-ware piled high with fruit, confections and flowers. The artificial complexions and sartorial ostentation of the guests were enhanced by the soft light, and, beyond the table where the silent domestics walked, beyond marble pillars, the shadowy forms of the dancers weaved in and out like butterflies fluttering in the dusk of evening. In the palm and fern-decked gallery at the end of the chamber the harp, the spinet, the violins, the German flutes, the lutes and the deep-toned violoncellos combined to pour forth sweet melody under the dreamy though watchful eyes of the *maestro*.

The dinner itself, the rich and lavish table appointments, the deportment of the guests, the indiscriminate consumption of wine, the immoderate eating and drinking, and the salacious whispers, would offend and shock the cultured host, hostess and guest of to-day. Forks were no longer an innovation, but were still regarded by many as dangerous tools with which to prod at the mouth, and these people occasionally used their fingers with a dexterity and disregard for cleanliness that would, in these fastidious days, be thought repulsive. Wines, always a necessary item, poured down the throats of men and women in astonishing quantities; and, as the feast progressed, the men became more truculent and boastful and the women less guarded in their appreciation of certain loudly-spoken witticisms.

It was noticed by the watchful Panizzi that neither Marie nor Castlehaven drank their usual quantities of wine and that both seemed to eat little. Balsamo sipped a light wine. But what the observant Panizzi did not see was that Mascagni and his fiery young companion, Luigi Rienzi, were also drinking sparingly and were grim with it. The Earl adhered to the fashion in dress that prevailed before the Puritans seized and beheaded their king. He

partly reclined on a broad chair so that his clothes might be seen to advantage and admired. His dark, curling hair fell upon the wide, white collar that was edged with lace and pointed in the Van Dyck style. His doublet of cream-coloured velvet, slashed at the sleeves, was lavishly piped with blue and silver braid. The cuffs of the doublet were edged with point lace to match his collar. Blue silk ribbon tied his breeches at the knees.

Balsamo and Mascagni were clad in sombre black, the former wearing his long cloak with the jewelled clasp, the latter a sable cloak with a wide, red collar. The lithe figure of Luigi Rienzi was dressed in the Genoese mode. His hat was wide and black and was without feather or band. His scarlet doublet was close fitting and frothed at the neck and wrists with an abundance of Alençon lace. He kept his dark, insolent eyes on Castlehaven when not stealing furtive glances at the syndic.

Marie sat on Balsamo's right and was conscious that all the women present were eyeing with envy her overgown of shimmering cloth of silver, her white, gold-braided satin petticoat, her flowered, pink, tightly-laced bodice that was cut even lower than fashion decreed, and the wonderful Spanish comb, agleam with jewels, that adorned her red-gold hair. In Balsamo's eyes, and in the eyes of others, she was a vision of loveliness.

Monsignor Foscolo had been sent to the banquet to convey the archbishop's apologies. Garbed in the conventional black *berretta* and flowing cassock, the prelate sat on the merchant's left, and his shrewd, piercing, black eyes twinkled at the Englishman's wit and whimsical manner. The tall, thin, urbane, grey-headed disciple of Loyola found this fugitive heretic very entertaining.

An unending procession of servants brought steaming fish, meat and game. Birds were torn to pieces and devoured. Wines flowed and vanished, while the conversation ranged from the spiced gossip of the boudoir to the

influence of Cromwell's death upon the politics of Europe. Far down the row of guests Panizzi still tapped the table with his leg of goose. He felt out of it all, and was annoyed with the chatter of Marie's mother, who preened herself with the vanity of a bird of paradise as she presided in the capacity of hostess at his end of the table.

But at last he flung the battered leg of goose into a basket designed to catch such scraps. Then he took a hearty draught of wine, shook himself as though awakening from sleep, grinned amiably at those opposite, and delighted the women beside him with sundry winks and nudges, accompanied by a shower of compliments. The sly pressure of his leg against theirs was sufficient to make them titter and reward him with coy, provocative glances. Panizzi settled down to enjoy himself, and presently was conjuring roars of laughter from those adjacent to him.

Balsamo drew the attention of those near him to the now jocular Panizzi, and even the suave churchman smiled with genuine amusement at the manner in which the philosopher gave point to his stories, ogled the women beside him, and tipped back his dome-like head to allow the wine to flow down his throat.

"Friend Girolamo was silent so long that I began to think he must damp the spirits of all around him," said the merchant. "But, like the honest fellow he is, he has at last aroused himself for my sake. Panizzi, if he chooses, can bring laughter from the lips of a statue."

"I confess I have never found him entertaining," was Mascagni's rather surly reply. He peered at Panizzi, who was at the moment toasting Marie's mother in extravagant terms. The syndic's eyes narrowed as he continued. "To me, the fellow seems too fond of his belly, and, as for being honest, well, are not all the little men honest?"

Although so softly spoken, this double-edged gibe caused many brows to arch in surprise. Monsignor Foscolo, his face as inscrutable as an Eastern Buddha, turned and

quietly surveyed the syndic. Then his impersonal glance wandered to the merchant. Balsamo, however, showed no displeasure at his guest's rudeness.

"I fear you were ever a poor judge of men, Romano; and, if your remarks are the result of a considered opinion, the matter explains itself," he said. "Panizzi, I take the trouble to repeat, is an honest fellow. Of course, it may merely be my conviction that his wit is well flavoured. If to be honest is to be little, then you should know that it is upon the little men the world depends."

"I am in entire agreement with you, Signor Balsamo," drawled Castlehaven. He leaned back in his chair and toyed with his goblet. His blue eyes were keen and cold as they stared into the crafty ones of Mascagni.

"And that, of course, settles the matter," was Rienzi's sarcastic comment. "Castlehaven has thrown his weighty decision into the scales, and the tip in favour of our worthy host." The Genoese gallant twisted his lips into an obvious sneer and his eyes were insolent as he gazed at the Englishman.

Monsignor Foscolo sipped his wine thoughtfully and in silence. He, at least, was said to be a judge of men. He sipped again when Castlehaven slowly sat upright in his chair and turned his head towards Rienzi.

"Advice, as I have reason to know, is very often the device of the mean man," said the Earl, his eyes half-closed, his lips smiling. "But, as no man has yet accused me of the crime of meanness, I now make bold to offer you certain suggestions. Signor Rienzi, there are a few things you should never do; one is to bother to stir that mind of yours from obfuscation into a semblance of intelligence; another, to make free with wine, for it gives you false courage; and yet another, to allow your lip to curl so when you speak. My remarks, of course, are well meant."

"Come, come, my friends," said Balsamo quickly. "This because of Panizzi, and he ignorant of it all." He turned

to Castlehaven before Rienzi could speak. "My lord, what promises in England now that Cromwell is dead? What, think you, will be the turn of affairs there?"

Rienzi seized his opportunity.

"Oh, the heretic rats will continue to gnaw the flesh of the true church," he said before the Earl could reply. He reached for more wine.

Mascagni sniggered audibly. Monsignor Foscolo looked about him and selected grapes. Marie, who had been a silent though interested listener, gasped at Rienzi's audacity and outrageous conduct. Balsamo's face was set in stern lines. But the Earl saved him the necessity of rebuking his guest.

"Signor, you have not heeded my advice—" he began.

"To the foul pit with your advice!" interposed the scarlet-clad Rienzi furiously. His head lifted defiantly. "If I were His Holiness——"

But he did not enlighten those who listened as to what he would do were he wearing the triple crown, for the reason that Monsignor Foscolo bent upon him a sudden look that gave him pause. The prelate was again contentedly munching his grapes and spitting the skins upon the dish before him, when Castlehaven laughed mockingly and leaned forward with his hands clasped.

"Ladies and gentlemen, pray do not take him seriously," he said lightly. "The Signor Rienzi has mistaken this apartment for a tavern. It is said that habit is strong upon us, so we must try to make allowances for him."

"Englishman—" Rienzi's wine was dancing in his glass.

"Signor Balsamo," continued the Earl, ignoring Rienzi and his bellicose manner, "England, I pray, will once again be England. We of noble blood have a vast work of reclamation before us. That land of ours, so fair and proud, must be lifted beyond reach of the filthy paws that have for many years past defiled it"

Monsignor Foscolo lifted his eyes from the fruit, and fixed them upon the Earl. From his ingenuous manner it might be assumed that he was ignorant of conditions and the trend of events in England. His tone implied that he was indeed fortunate to meet with one so well informed as the Earl.

"Ah, yes," he said in his smooth, quiet voice, "but who will remove these regicides from the path of the late king's son? My lord, what of the Protector's powerful supporters? Even though Cromwell is dead, there are still, I am told, thousands of armed men that are Cromwell's at heart. You spoke in prophetic vein. Is it not futile, even dangerous, to prophesy?"

"On the contrary, Monsignor, a very simple matter," was the Earl's emphatic reply. "England was not merely virtually under one man's domination, but was actually under his heel. That man has gone to join the devil, his master! Now, mark my words, we shall see the remaining rascals begin to tear at each other's vitals. Richard Cromwell? The fellow should be wearing petticoats! Monk, Fairfax, and Lambert? Their day is done. Each has his following in the cursed rebel army, and when the split does come—well, there is an end to it."

"The devil—his master! Bah! Is not the devil the master of all heretics?" demanded Rienzi sullenly, his voice rising above the burst of music from the gallery. "A thousand pities the whole accursed brood is not put to the sword. England! Just a kennel where different breeds of curs yap and tear at each other, as curs will."

"Luigi," said the suave Mascagni, his expression becoming a leer as he glanced at the Earl, "you forget that Castlehaven is an Englishman. I note by his demeanour that he resents your words. Have a care, my impulsive friend! Have a care, I say!"

For a moment Castlehaven remained rigid. Then he relaxed and laughed softly. Only his eyes, burning and

glittering like twin stars, betrayed the fact that Rienzi's thrust had touched him. Deliberately he grasped a decanter and placed it beside the one from which the Genoese had been helping himself.

"Signor!" he said harshly. "You have heretics on the brain. Drain that decanter also. We shall at least have silence when you are thoroughly drunk, and, offensive as you will then be, it will be nothing to what you now are. Out of consideration for our good host, I refrain from giving my opinion of your person, clothes, manners, parentage, and beastly habits."

Monsignor Foscolo's calm, unemotional voice was like oil upon troubled waters. Rienzi, who had half-risen from his chair, again subsided when the prelate began to speak.

"Your kind attention, ladies and gentlemen," he said. "Signor Balsamo, I perceive, desires to speak. I suspect that his words will be of great interest to us. In fact, I anticipate a pronouncement that will deepen the colour in the pretty cheek of the charming lady beside him. Ah, yes! It is so!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE laughter ceased. The sweet, haunting strains from the orchestra became the softest whisper and then died away. Twenty pairs of eyes gazed at Balsamo as he slowly rose to his feet. His manner betrayed a slight nervousness while he looked smilingly down the long table. For a few moments he seemed content to remain motionless, his dark eyes luminous with inward rapture, his mien suggesting both pride and humility. Panizzi's nodding head appeared to give him confidence, for when he spoke he extended his arms wide in a gesture of welcome, his smile deepened, and his voice was stronger and of deeper timbre than usual.

"There are certain times in the lives of both men and women when the heart desires to pour forth its sense of complete happiness but the mind, alas, refuses to frame the appropriate sentences," he said. The words came slowly and distinctly. "You, my friends, who have so kindly consented to sit at my table are indeed welcome; and it is to you that I wish to announce that I, Guiseppe Balsamo, am this night honoured in being privileged to tell you that the fairest of all women to me has consented to be my bride——"

He paused to allow the hum of comment to cease. Marie's poise was perfect. She assumed that demureness so becoming to her. Her eyes looked up at Balsamo, and in them shone love and faith. Her lips were parted with the smile of guileless, innocent maidenhood. Castlehaven, whose demeanour expressed polite interest, secretly marvelled at the perfection of her simulation, and he vowed to himself that the lesson of this piece of superb acting should ever be in his mind in the future. His glance shot from her across the table and met the contemptuous one of Mascagni. The syndic's arm rested on the table and the fingers of the hand tapped furiously. Only Marie, Castlehaven and Luigi Rienzi knew that the humour that prompted him to grin was sardonic. Balsamo turned and looked ardently down at her, and then, extending his arm, assisted her to rise. When she stood by his side he again addressed his guests.

"I do not believe in what certain irreligious persons term fate," he solemnly informed them, "for I am convinced that nothing less than Divine Will caused my betrothed to bestow her love upon me. For that my thanks arise to God, and I vow before you all, as later I shall vow at the altar itself, to protect her, to love her and to honour her. Let me present to you the gentle lady that shall rule the heart and wealth of Guiseppe Balsamo. My friends—the future Signora Balsamo!"

Balsamo and Marie resumed their seats to the thunderous acclamation of the guests, and her beautiful face was suffused with blushes, as Monsignor Foscolo had predicted. All in the room saw that the merchant was exalted. His love for her filled him with ecstasy, and not a few of the women wondered at it and envied Marie her good fortune. The health of the betrothed pair was again and again drunk in goblets of foaming wine. Guest after guest sprang, reeled, or struggled to their feet and showered compliments upon them. The women, seated on broad chairs so that the wide vertigals should give the minimum of discomfort, leaned in or out and nodded their heads in a congratulatory manner, indicating their entire approval of, and satisfaction with, everything. Their eyes sparkled with the stimulation of food, wine and subtle compliment; and their exposed, powdered bosoms rose and fell breathlessly.

And all the time the eating and drinking continued. Astonishing confections in the shapes of castles, ships, giants and animals were hacked to pieces and devoured. Sweets and fruits vanished at an amazing rate and in prodigious quantities. The wine flowed continually. Alert attendants in the merchant's livery of sable and blue hurriedly replaced empty decanters and flagons by full ones. The musicians in the gallery drew throbbing, pulse-quickening melody from the strings of their instruments, and the dancers seemed as though they were fleeing in mock terror before the leaping, piping figure of Pan himself.

Monsignor Foscolo rose to his feet, his spare, tall frame inclined slightly forward. The music became faint and caressing as the strings were muted. The prelate spoke quietly and without haste. His demeanour was one of humble superiority, and he addressed them in the paternal manner the fathers of the Church adopt towards their

children. He did not speak for long and, in conclusion, he said:

"The holy church extends its blessing to this contemplated union. It is with regret that His Grace the Archbishop tenders his apologies, and he desires me to convey his great appreciation of this devoted couple. Genoa has given great men to the world. The mighty Columbus was her son, and although our host is not a native born, he had taken Genoa to his heart, and by his courage and enterprise his argosies bring riches and commercial renown to this ancient maritime city. We have at this generous table to-night men who are representative of Genoa's nobility, of commerce on land and sea, of the law and learning, of the sea and land forces that defend this great republic, and men whose forefathers grappled with the power of the Venetian dogate. That such distinguished gentlemen and their gracious wives should attend this banquet proves and illustrates the esteem the citizens of Genoa have for our host. Signor Balsamo and Signorina Pleyel, accept my blessing and congratulation. May a long life of happiness and useful service be yours."

Long and loud were the *vivas* for both Marie and her lover. The approbation of the guests, the women being as demonstrative as the men, was spontaneous and vociferous. When the tumult had quieted somewhat, the prelate expressed his reluctance at being obliged to leave the banquet at this stage, and, after a brief talk with Balsamo, returned the bows of the assembly and left the chamber. A tactful man was Monsignor Foscolo.

Mascagni was so furious with his host's manifest pleasure, popularity and high standing with the heirarchy that he nearly forgot to conceal his true feelings towards his host—and enemy. His eyes gleamed like two pinpoints of flame, his moist, dribbling mouth sent the saliva dripping on to his beard, and his hands opened and shut with the convulsive, clutching movement so suggestive of

the talons of a bird of prey. His rage mounted, until he found it necessary to exert all his will-power to banish the glare from his eyes and the flush from his brow. It was with difficulty that he mastered the passionate impulse that surged within him. But at last he conquered the malign urge and wiped the beads of sweat from his brow with his napkin.

Castlehaven and Rienzi saw and understood his wrath, and the breath of the latter came hissingly from between his teeth: he would be a heavy loser if Mascagni wrecked the plan agreed upon by loss of self-control. Castlehaven was not less concerned, for time was passing and as yet Rienzi had not taken advantage of opportunity. The Earl frowned with momentary impatience and then, when he caught the syndic's evil glance, burst into laughter. Having succeeded in drawing attention to himself, he looked at Rienzi and arched his brows in an insolent, supercilious manner.

"Signor," he said with a bantering air, "I verily believe you have frightened the worthy prelate away. Did you observe how ill at ease he was when your tone was so minatory? I vow he nearly had a fit when you were about to substitute yourself for the Pope. Why, man, not even a gourmand could stomach that. But, come, let us drink the other's health and in future avoid contentious topics, like sensible men. What say you to that?"

"You would drink to me, Englishman?" demanded Rienzi. He stood up and filled his goblet to the brim. Balsamo smiled, for he was relieved that the two men were about to compose their differences in this friendly way.

"His lordship would drink to anyone," interposed Mascagni. He sniggered in his hateful, provocative manner.

"Yes; I would drink to you and with you," replied the Earl. He ignored Mascagni.

"And, as you are so free in your discussions, doubtless

you will drink a toast to His Holiness the Pope?" continued Rienzi, his face almost as scarlet as his doublet.

"I said I would drink with you, Signor. If it will please you to have me drink to the Pope, why, so I will. Monsignor Foscolo, had I requested it, would have done me the courtesy of toasting my king. In exchange, will you do likewise?" The Earl lounged back in his chair and smiled up at Rienzi.

"You ask me to drink to your king?" the Genoese asked, his frame stiff as though with amazement.

"Yes, that is my request," was the quiet response.

"My answer to that, Englishman," cried Rienzi loudly, holding his goblet high, "is may you and your heretic king rot for ever in the pit. Even if you will crawl to me I will not grovel before you or your outcast Charles——"

"Rienzi!" gasped Balsamo, struggling to rise. "It is my wish that you leave——"

"Come, Guiseppe; the lad is right," growled the syndic, leaning forward and glaring at the merchant. Then his voice and manner changed swiftly and he was again the whining, cringing, insinuating Mascagni. "You well know that his lordship's words are false. We do not permit heretics to mock the Pope nor do we do honour to the dogs. My friend, courtesy is well in its place, but it does not extend itself to heresy."

"Be not concerned for me, Signor Balsamo," said Castlehaven, his voice hard, his eyes cold, his figure stiffening into an attitude of wariness as he surveyed first Rienzi and then the syndic. "As for your guest, I refuse to be provoked. I have been informed that Signor Rienzi's ancestors were among those who endeavoured to repel the encroachment of the Venetian dogate and so preserve Genoa as a power on the sea. And now this fellow cannot curb his petty truculence. God! How his breed has degenerated. But no doubt some common kitchen-

wench is to blame for the pernicious quality of the base blood that is in him."

"Ha! Say you that I am of tainted birth?" Rienzi's roaring voice reached every ear in the chamber. The guests exchanged looks, in which astonishment and apprehension were mingled. Panizzi, open-mouthed, dumbfounded, stared along the table. Both Marie and her mother sat silent and still. Rienzi appeared to be beside himself with fury. His features worked spasmodically while he spat out the venomous words.

"Listen, braggart!" he roared. "Before these people I name you coward, base, heretical dog, and seducer of women. What! No move from you after that?"

Castlehaven was a deathly white as he gazed at the flushed, taunting Rienzi. When the Genoese ceased shouting the only sound heard in the chamber was the quick, nervous breathing of the guests. Even the musicians in the gallery were unable to continue. The Earl turned to Balsamo so that his voice might be heard by all.

"Signor, my profound regrets. But I pray you pardon this uncouth, bawling fellow. He is drunk——"

"Oh, the devilish cunning of a craven!" raved Rienzi, his left hand pointing at the Englishman, his right closed round the stem of his goblet. "You shall not shelter behind Signor Balsamo. But it is ever the way with such as you to crawl behind even a cripple. Will *that* whip your blood to life?"

And Castlehaven's hair, face and doublet were suddenly drenched with the wine from Rienzi's goblet.

Mascagni could have danced with sheer delight at the horror that leapt into Balsamo's face. A cripple! The pain of it. The merchant fell back on his chair, chilled by the merciless taunt. Momentarily he was deprived of the power of speech and action. That one of his guests should so wound and insult him and turn his happy

banquet into a vulgar, degrading brawl almost robbed him of the power of thought. His face was pale and drawn as he stared first at one and then at the other.

But the scene was the wine of revenge to the syndic, and greedily he drank it in; eagerly he anticipated the draught to follow. Rienzi's action brought the guests to their feet in consternation, for they knew that he had probably forfeited his life. The only calm persons in the whole assembly were Mascagni and Castlehaven. The Earl remained seated, even though the wine had partly blinded him and was now dripping down from curls and stained collar down on to doublet and breeches. He wiped his eyes and shrugged his shoulders in a manner that eloquently suggested the duel that must inevitably follow was none of his seeking. His words were crisp when he rose to his feet and addressed Balsamo.

"Signor, this is deplorable," he said clearly. "But the impetuous Signor has left me no possible alternative. All here can testify that I have been forced into this duel against my will. Signor Balsamo, your pardon and indulgence while Rienzi and I retire to discuss the matter. No! It does not require the attendance of seconds. Formality is unnecessary in this instance, for I purpose merely to clip this cockerel's wings so that he will not fly so high in the future."

"You fight well with your tongue, Englishman," Rienzi retorted, savagely, bitterly. "But you will need a sharper weapon before many minutes pass."

"Signor Rienzi, the sward down on the promontory awaits us. It is sufficiently far away to prevent the sound of steel reaching and disturbing our host and his guests. The young moon will give us light."

All eyes followed them as they walked from the chamber. Mascagni stretched out a restraining hand when the merchant made to rise from his chair.

"Let them go, Guiseppe. Rienzi needs a lesson," he

said blandly. "Castlehaven will do no more than show him that he is as great a fool with his sword as he is with his tongue. Both will be back shortly, and the chastened Rienzi will no doubt make the apologies due to you."

Mascagni's opinion was upheld by the majority of the men, and Balsamo, knowing it was beyond his power to prevent the duel, signalled to the *maestro* in the gallery. Then he gave his attention to Marie, who was visibly shaken and unnerved by the violent incident she had witnessed. Quickly he proffered wine, but she waved it away with a trembling hand. Her dark eyes were wide and filled with dismay, and, although he spoke tenderly and endeavoured to sooth her by making light of the matter with kindly, encouraging words, she sank back like one on the point of collapse. He beckoned to her mother.

"Signora," he said, his tone betraying his concern, "would it not be advisable to assist Marie to her apartment? That insolent Rienzi, by his drunken, brawling conduct, has frightened her. Stay with her until she recovers and desires to return. I cannot leave my guests and must give my attention to their pleasure and comfort. Be gentle with her, Signora, for it is my heart itself that I am entrusting to your care."

Was it then the dark curtains that mercifully shroud the future lifted their impenetrable folds and permitted Balsamo a fleeting glimpse of the dim, intangible things beyond? Was it presentiment, that prophetic sense that brings doubt, foreboding and dread to the mind, that made him rise to his feet and clasp his betrothed in arms that trembled as they pressed her to him? What was it that caused him to stand and gaze after her with eyes filled with pleading, love, and something akin to fear? Who can say? It is given to no man to know that God-given fragment of immortality, the soul, or to understand fully its promptings or destiny. Marie and her mother paused at

the threshold of the chamber. For a space they gazed in silence at Balsamo. Then Marie laughed and they hurried away.

When the two women had departed Mascagni filled his goblet and leered at Balsamo. One hand shielded his grinning, slobbering mouth, while the other lifted the wine so that it gleamed against the light like bright blood fresh from the heart.

"Be not alarmed, Guiseppe," he said. His voice was rasping and shrill. "She is merely a little overwrought. Your health, my friend. Come, drink with me to your beautiful betrothed and to your future happiness. Ah, drink, drink! Drink long and deep . . . long and deep. . . ."

CHAPTER NINE

THE young moon! The pale lamp of remembrance hung low in the western sky, a silver-white crescent, clear cut and brilliant against the bluish-black, star-lit depths of space. Its tender light, while sufficient to illumine objects close by, seemed only to intensify the shadows clinging to the mist-laden folds of the hills that looked down on the murmuring sea. The air was redolent of the sweet odours of hill-side, garden and shore; citron, orange, thyme and jasmine blended with the primeval scent of ocean and turf to form a perfume indescribably subtle and delightful to the senses. It was a night of peace, of soft whisperings of rustling leaves, of water rippling and splashing gently over worn, smooth rocks, of happy, singing voices, of tinkling laughter, of close embrace and clinging lips, of love. A night of peace until the metallic clash and harsh raspings of vicious steel rang above the softer echoes. A night of love until a dying man painfully raised himself upon the

elbow and peered down at the hurrying forms of two women, and at the man that advanced and clasped one of them to him in fierce passion. Then all too swiftly were passion and death loosed upon the serene night, personified, as it were, by the two locked breast to breast while the life slowly ebbed from the prostrate man above them. Peace, love, passion, and death!

A few cables away from the promontory a dark, silent ship waited for an answer to the masked light that flashed intermittently from her high poop. Down by the water-lapped steps of stone a stout boat scraped against the rock, her armed crew of eight, shadowy and indistinct, crouched in silence over ready oars. No word was spoken. The roughly-garbed, bearded, barefooted men sat motionless, refusing to reply to the curious questions of the crews of gondolas that floated near-by. In any case they could not have replied, for they were Englishmen; strange men to be waiting, resolute and grim, at the water-gate of a Genoese merchant prince.

Luigi Rienzi paced to and fro along the curved path that surrounded the basin on the middle terrace. He laughed as he snapped open his snuff-box and inhaled a pinch, laughed and chuckled hugely at the success and simplicity of it all. The sound of his mirth died away, and it did not strike him that his laughter had sounded unnatural and lonely; and lonely laughter is pregnant with the dreariness of solitude. His brief glimpse of Castlehaven's heavily-laden servant scuttling past towards the terrace below was a contributory factor to his amusement. The thin, sly fellow, Diogenes Snoop by name, staggered under the weight of his load. Rienzi wondered if there was anything left for his lordship to carry.

There was. The Earl came walking briskly, and under his arm was a pair of slender Italian rapiers of Ferrara steel, pliant, wicked weapons, needle-pointed. He was still wearing his elegant, though wine-stained, blue and cream

costume, but in addition a dark cloak hung from his left shoulder. The long feather on his hat nodded as he walked. He addressed Rienzi briefly.

"So you waited?" he said, his eyes cold in the dim light.

Rienzi again chuckled.

"My lord, I must see the end of this thing," he replied, falling into step with his companion. "It means so much to me."

"You shall!" was Castlehaven's grim rejoinder. "I brought the steel so that we may play the farce to its end. There may be witnesses lurking. Ah, this level patch will serve. The choice of a blade is yours, Signor."

Rienzi shook with merriment, but he did not select a rapier, so convulsed was he at his lordship's wit.

"Ah, if only the cripple—" he began, his voice husky, his sides shaking.

"Signor, the choice of a blade is yours!" The deadly quality of the tone brought Rienzi to a rigid attitude.

His dark eyes widened with perplexity and amazement. Surely he had mistaken the significance of the cold words. There was a moment of silence, and then he spoke.

"I want no blade, my lord. That business is finished," he said stiffly. "It is but my intention to witness the end of this comedy before returning."

"Signor," said the Earl gently, "you will either fight or carry the coward's mark to your grave. I have taken an intense dislike to your revolting person, and I would prove to you that I fight with my sword—not with my tongue you pestilence in red!"

The wine was still in Rienzi's blood. The blind courage whipped by the vintage mounted above his usual caution. The hot blood leapt to his brain as his hat spun into the shrubs and his scarlet doublet followed it.

"My rapier—and guard yourself!" he grunted thickly

hurriedly grasping a weapon and testing its temper and balance.

The duel was brief and quickly decided.

Castlehaven laughed and nonchalantly brought his blade to the salute. Then it flickered towards Rienzi. The blades gleamed in the faint moonlight and seemed to whisper caressingly when they first gently touched, for wrist was feeling and testing the strength of wrist. Tiny beads of sweat quickly sprang from Rienzi's brow. In spite of the moisture it was as cold as marble. His arm was numb, his feet like lead. Castlehaven laughed a second time. Rienzi was a poor swordsman. The Genoese was now quivering with terror, for his blade was locked by the blade of his adversary, held, seemingly, for an eternity. His breath caught and threatened to choke him when his foot slipped on the dewy grass. He sobbed as the rapiers writhed and hissed, for premonition interpreted the song they sang. With difficulty he disengaged and lunged fiercely, and his point ripped the Earl's white collar close to the throat. It was a wild and despairing attempt, and very nearly succeeded. Castlehaven laughed a third time as his steel went in above the heart. He had no time to play with his enemy. Coolly he tossed his blade away and watched the stricken man sink to the ground. He knew Rienzi would fight and boast no more. It had been easier than he had anticipated, yet he had experienced a very close call. Another inch to the right and he, instead of the Genoese, would have been sprawling on the wet grass, clawing at the roots with pain-inspired ferocity. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Rienzi," he said, smiling down at his victim, "it may help you to die, knowing that Mascagni desired and arranged your death. He has no further use for you, and your tongue might prove most embarrassing, even dangerous, to our thoughtful friend. In that I agree with

him, knowing how capably you employ it. But you can settle with him when he joins you and the devil, his master. Familiar words, eh, Signor? The devil—his master! Be sure and twist Beelzebub's tail when you greet him. Faugh, you dog! Death is too easy for you."

Rienzi's wild eyes looked up in the gloom, terrible in their rage, terror and despair. His lips, wet with the blood froth, trembled as they moved in speech.

"Assassin," he whispered weakly.

"Not at all, Signor," Castlehaven amiably assured him, thoughtfully fingering the jagged rent in his collar. "It is but a few minutes since you expressed a desire to put all heretics and Englishmen to the sword. In spite of your rôle your words rang all too sincerely. How like you your own medicine? It is bitter, I vow. But it will cure you of your foul, papistic disease. Assassin . . . ? Now you are not even man enough to die. Pish, fellow! It was a fair fight. I could have had you seized and drowned under water like a rat. You had the same chance as I, and, by the whole calendar of your saints! it was more than you deserved."

Castlehaven turned his back contemptuously upon the prostrate man and walked to where the steps led down to the water. His gait was buoyant, his eyes untroubled. His perfumed kerchief was daintily raised to his nostrils, as though to drive away some lingering offensive odour. Already he had forgotten Rienzi. Marie filled his thoughts. He paused at the top of the steps and inclined his head to catch any sound of her approach. Below him the boat, with its invisible crew, rose and fell and scraped against the rock. The water lapped and gurgled as it washed over and then drained off the steps. The wind was rising, and, though as yet blowing gently from off the land, it gave concern to those that manned the boat: the vagaries of the wind on this coast were well known, and none could say whether the breeze would or would not become a gale

that bent the trees and set the sea boiling and tossing in response to its wild, driving turbulence.

But at last the Earl caught the sound of swiftly-moving feet. Laughing softly, he descended the steps.

"Here comes m'dear at last," he muttered. "The virtue of a plan lies in its successful execution. I flatter myself that I have been successful. But, although she is mine, I wish the devil would fly away with her mother. But what matters it? The dame had better not give rein to her authority on yonder ship. By God, no! Ho, there! A lantern! Charon and his freight were not more ghostly. 'Tis as black as the Styx in the shadow of this rock. Come, you spawn of Bridewell's beauties! Make haste with the glim, I say!"

The feeble yellow rays of the lantern revealed Marie and her mother, hand-in-hand, cautiously, almost timidly, descending the steps. Gone were the wide, stiff vertigals and flowered overgowns, the tight bodices and jewelled combs. Both women had discarded the fine apparel worn at the banquet and had dressed themselves in becoming silk gowns that draped round them in soft, clinging folds. No time was lost. Scarcely had Castlehaven taken Marie in his arms when the oars dipped into the sea. The light was extinguished and the boat surged forward towards the waiting ship. The Earl strained Marie to him, careless of the fact that her mother sat beside them.

"My mother," she whispered, turning in a futile effort to avoid his eager lips.

"M'dear, m'dear, she has other things to interest her," was the quick, arrogant response. "Your mother, my fair, lovely Marie, has ceased to count in the scheme of things. She has the choice of two things—silence or solitude. I trust she can appreciate the wide difference."

That she could was proved by the fact that she did not speak while Castlehaven indulged the preliminaries of his passion. His words were spoken with disturbing emphasis

and had revealed to both women that they, from the moment the boat left the shore, were solely dependent for their comfort and security upon his goodwill and favour. Here was no pliant, adoring lover, no soft spoken, infatuated cripple, but a man determined and dominant, and whose masterful mind was already showing from under the thin pretence of love. Here was no man to be mocked and thwarted, no abject slave to a beautiful woman's swift-changing humours. This man's will was law! And both Marie and her mother suddenly realized it, and before the boat had gone a cable's length from the shore vain regret tore at the heart of each. Shadows and sorrow! A woman's wit! How brave those words had sounded when spoken scornfully, boastfully, in the security of a luxurious apartment. How weak and empty were they now as they sprang to Marie's mind. At the gripping fear of losing all, she went limp in the arms that encircled her. The creaking of the oars against the thole-pins, the wash of the blades in the sea, and the thudding of the bows as they cut into the rising waves, sang a dirge that echoed in melancholy fashion in the minds of both women. Gone was the romantic glamour of the night. The curved moon, now blood-red and sinking towards the dark, serrated mountain-top, cast a wan, sickly light upon a black, restless sea.

Castlehaven laughed with pleasure and triumph. He did not see that the eyes of the woman who lay passively in his arms were dim with tears, nor would he have moved to pity if he had, for was not this her deliberate choice? What mattered it to him that she wept in vain regret? What had she not left behind so that her whims might be gratified? Death to one man and what to another? The selfish, vain, foolish little fool! No feeling had she for others. Men to her were merely stepping-stones in the stream of life, to be trodden underfoot in her journey to place and power. He bent over and whispered:

"It is an ancient game, fair charmer, in which wily woman is sometimes outwitted. The Countess of Castlehaven, m'dear, must be like Cæsar's wife in one respect at least—she *must* be above suspicion. I sadly fear you do not qualify. If women, by their subtle arts, trade upon the appeal of sex, then they must not complain if they experience the result of that appeal. If the proffered fruit be plucked by either angel or ape, well, m'dear, what right have they to murmur? What title have they to sympathy?"

Marie was silent. The mocking words sounded the knell of her fond hopes and ambition. Her flesh crept as the realization of her true value and position dawned upon her. She did not speak, but the creaking knock of oars against pins answered the question with maddening reiteration.

"None, none, none!" they rapped out harshly.

She shuddered. The gloom and murk of the night, the doleful sigh of the rising wind, the hiss of the flying spray, all presaged the shadows and sorrows of hateful days to come. How welcome now would be the sound of tapping stick, limping foot and gentle voice. In the darkness her mother, furious and bitter at heart, gained what comfort she could from the feel of the emerald necklace about her throat. She, at least, had that.

CHAPTER TEN

BALSAMO was ill-at-ease and deeply concerned about the prolonged absence of Marie, Castlehaven and Rienzi, but he allowed no sign to betray his anxiety as he conversed with Mascagni.

"Ah, Romano," he said, "the tapestry of life is crossed with the white and black threads of honour and infamy;

and here and there, blazing forth their meaning to discerning eyes, are the scarlet threads. Blood has ever been the price paid for attainment or atonement. Sacrifice! We are the weavers! From us come those white, dark and crimson threads that tell of our honour, our baseness, or our violence—threads that limn our characters for ever upon the imperishable record of humanity."

Mascagni laughed and settled back comfortably in his chair.

"Guiseppe," he said, "the very threads you mention make it a drab pattern. Honour? Men vary greatly when the term is practised, they wisely allow themselves a little margin. Baseness? It is but a loose term for the gain of one at the expense of another, whether in money or women—a matter of pique. Violence? Life cannot survive without it. Indeed, is not man himself evidence of the violence of his father? But who care about that? No, no, Guiseppe! These things are natural and necessary. Without selfishness we cannot prosper, without baseness we cannot progress, and without violence we cannot live. But it is all, of course, a matter of degree."

"Sophist," retorted Balsamo in dry, rather caustic tones. "Surely you are above such self-deception? A fine state of things, Romano! A syndic of Genoa upholding such subversive tenets. Your knowledge of the law should cause you to refute such thought."

"Let us not delude ourselves concerning the law, even though it is supposed to be the common cloak of equity and protection," growled Mascagni. He was not pleased with Balsamo's remarks. "The law—but there is a man here who exemplifies the protection of the law. His case is instructive. Look down your table and observe Matteo there! He sat down sober, but now look at him. Note his popping eyes, his trembling hand, his surly mien and his careless clothes. A dozen years ago the fellow was nearly as wealthy as you. A relation—he was by the same

father, but his mother was a wench of the estate, so we will call him a relation—in a contrary, vindictive mood contested his great possessions. What happened? Oh, yes, the law protected poor Matteo—but his lawyers divided the estate. It proved a profitable plot for them, and the bastard was well paid for being a puppet. And Matteo, too, was a gentle soul, like you, Guiseppe, until he realized the true aspect of life. By the Mass! he is now poor, but he is no longer gentle. Some day, my friend, life will deal you a buffet that will wake your soul from its dreams. You will be amazed at what you see."

"I am too old to change either my views or my nature, Romano. I do not hold with your arguments. I regard them as false, even foolish. Man, my friend, although born to immortality, is but mortal, and well I know it. I fear your duties take you amongst unfortunate creatures, from whom you form your estimate of all men. That is unwise, for an embittered man, chained to the galley benches or hewing the great slabs in the marble quarries, is apparently man in form only."

Mascagni grinned in his sly, cynical manner while he listened and watched the attendants place fresh candles on the table. Balsamo's earnestness, which he construed as cant, afforded him deep inward amusement. He was patiently waiting for the return of Panizzi, who, restless and apprehensive, had gone to seek information concerning the duel.

"Ah, yes, Guiseppe," he murmured, and his tone was mocking. "Your wizard's touch has brought to you riches that few men can gather, yet I believe your pleasure is not in these things, but in the deceitful protestations of some wretched beggar that would lick your shoes for a coin and stab you afterwards; or in the fawning, lying assurances of some wanton that secretly laughs at your benevolence and sympathy. I fear you are not a very wise man, my friend."

"I make no claim to wisdom, Romano, but I am happy. Happiness is not entirely governed by material things, although I agree with you that they alone bring a restless content to certain natures. You are too harsh. Sympathy, my friend, is a gem beyond price, and no one loses by casting it even to swine. I fear we are too apt to see others through the eyes of our own peculiar natures. We judge them largely, if unthinkingly, by what we would do, think, and say."

"Not I—by God!" snarled Mascagni, his impatience showing itself in word and gesture. "The eminence to which I have attained was not gained in that fashion. Let me see a man, let the fellow open his mouth, and I know him! It is a gift, this insight into the natures of others, and I bless the saints it is a valuable one."

"Well that, at least, is a candid admission," said Balsamo. Then he wondered at the sudden fury that leapt into Mascagni's eyes. The syndic's peaked, lined features were momentarily cast in a satanic mould, and the soft mellow light from the fat, coloured candles seemed to reveal the writhing soul of the man. Balsamo was startled, for it was the first time he had seen behind the other's mask. The revelation was disquieting. He turned from Mascagni and was about to converse with another guest when a commotion without the chamber drew and held his attention. Panizzi's voice was heard, then the piping tones of the Nubian, then these were lost in a babble of tongues. The domestics beyond the banquet-chamber had evidently found interest in something of greater import than ordinary matters of routine.

"I hear Panizzi and the Nubian," said Balsamo, gazing anxiously in the direction of the sounds. "Mascagni, surely the quarrel has not had serious results? No; the Englishman would not take advantage of Rienzi's condition! Heretic though he is, I believe him to be a man of honour in such things——"

"An heretic a man of honour?" scoffed Mascagni. "I believe you would trust the devil himself. But perhaps that is how you amassed your wealth."

"The jest is stale, Romano, if not in questionable taste," the merchant replied sternly. "Coming from any but you, I might think envy prompted the words and the manner in which they were spoken. We will not again discuss my wealth, if you please. I regard . . . what now! God above us! My fears were justified! Ah, but this is a sad sight—the poor Rienzi, pale, and stained with his blood, supported by Panizzi and Sala. But where is the Earl?"

"I know not," Mascagni jerked out hoarsely. He sprang to his feet and glared at the men who were slowly approaching Balsamo. "But why bring Rienzi here? What stupidity to bring a wounded man to where guests are feasting. All eyes are observing them! The music and the talk dies away! The guests rise to their feet! Bah! The fools—the fools!"

It was as Mascagni had said. A silence deep and portentous settled upon the chamber. The guests sat and stood as though petrified in a quaint diversity of attitudes.

"That this should happen at my banquet in honour of Marie," Balsamo lamented. "I fear he is sorely stricken. His eyes stare fearfully from his white face, and his feet do nothing to support him. Ah, alas, alas! The blood is in his mouth. I like not that symptom. I pray Marie has not witnessed this tragedy—it would prostrate her. This is terrible. The men pale at the sight, and murmur; the women swoon, for death is in the room. How swiftly, indeed, can gloom and sorrow overshadow mirth. Horror is upon every face and in every heart. Alas, I can do nothing."

"Fools!—fools!—fools!—" screeched Mascagni. He leaned heavily upon the table. His face was as bloodless as Rienzi's; his cunning eyes were dilated with fear and rage, and his slobbering lips spat and dribbled. Castle-

haven had failed him, and he steeled himself to face Rienzi. His voice seemed to crackle as he continued. "Have we not been plagued enough by this fellow? Damn him! He craved the steel, and got it, and now——"

"Peace, Mascagni," said Balsamo quietly. "This is not the time for invective. Rienzi has an object in returning in such a pitiable condition. Let us have silence. He desires to speak."

"Balsamo, I warn you! I tell you that—" began the syndic, fuming at the merchant's words and swaying from side to side in his fury.

"Enough!" was the cold reply.

Then it was that the syndic seized his opportunity.

"Ho, ho! Enough, is it?" he shrilled, now beyond restraint. "Is it to insult your guests that you invite them here? Jesu! I will not endure it—not I! Since when have I been yours to command? Eh? Is it thus you dare to address a syndic of Genoa? May the devil fly away with you—you bladder of wind—you dupe! Bah! I gladly leave you and your insulting hospitality. Enough, indeed! I have had men whipped for less. No longer are we friends—fool!"

Mascagni was thankful beyond expression that Balsamo's curt, cold, imperious manner had given him a loop-hole through which to escape. He was glad of any excuse that enabled him to withdraw. Hence his swift change of manner and address towards the merchant who stared up at him in unfeigned amazement. Balsamo had spoken deliberately and with a purpose. His object was the testing of Mascagni's regard for him, a regard that had aroused doubt in his mind when that brief peep into the other's dark soul had been permitted him. The syndic's sudden twist from professed friend to deadly enemy, his swift turn from bland pretence to the white heat of malevolence, shocked the merchant into silence. In silence he eyed Mascagni's rage-convulsed features, his glaring, hate-

filled eyes, his wet mouth and beard, and his crooked, clutching hands. He did not speak when the syndic stepped back from the table, knocked over his chair, and flung the word "fool" at him. Mascagni, like a raven in his black clothes, strode across the floor with bent back and nodding head.

It was the helpless, mortally-wounded Rienzi that arrested his progress. A word sent the Nubian speeding like a black arrow to the space between the hanging tapestries. Sala turned and blocked Mascagni as he was about to pass through. The syndic recoiled and faced about furiously.

"Ha! What outrage is this?" he cried, his snarling, grating, rasping voice sounding loud in the silence of the chamber. "Who dares to impede a syndic of Genoa? Cripple, it is no wonder your guests group together and whisper in perplexity and terror. What mockery is this feast? Why are we forced to witness bloodshed and insolence towards guests? Command this savage to stand aside, or the outraged magistrates will inflict a salutary punishment."

"Hold . . . hold him," gasped Rienzi, his fingers limp, his dark eyes wild and staring, a tiny trickle of blood oozing from the corners of his mouth. The attention of the assembly was instantly concentrated upon him. "I pray you all to listen, for death . . . is fast upon me. I . . . Christ pity me . . . am nearly sped. A priest, I beseech . . . I implore!"

"Unfortunate Rienzi, waste not your strength in speech until a priest is brought," said Balsamo gently, rising from his chair and facing the young man. But Rienzi's head shook slightly, and he gazed pitifully about him as though seeking sympathy and encouragement from the silent guests.

"Signor Balsamo . . . now, before it is too late . . . crave your forgiveness."

"It is freely given, Rienzi," Balsamo hastily assured him, observing with sadness the grey hue upon his drawn face.

"Ah, but wait . . . listen, and you shall hear! Mascagni, that black devil yonder . . . has betrayed both you and me this night. I lose my life . . . oh, God! I feel myself dying. You . . . you lose your betrothed. . . . Ah, yes! She is gone with Castlehaven . . . gone from you for ever. She and her mother are even now upon the vessel awaiting them. I saw them go . . . saw the light flash on their faces . . . saw the Earl embrace her as the rowers bent their backs. . . . And Mascagni, because of his deep-abiding hatred . . . planned this thing. Listen, for my pain increases. . . . My breath . . . is choking me. A priest. . . . Merciful God. . . ."

Panizzi trembled. The hot, stinging tears almost blinded him as he saw the awful look of anguish that swept over the face of Balsamo. The wide, dark eyes of the merchant were fixed and staring wildly at the blood-stained, quivering lips of the speaker. Slowly, aghast, he sank down on his chair. Rienzi's voice, choked and hesitating, went on:

"It was all planned . . . Castlehaven, Mascagni, and myself. I owed Mascagni . . . a great sum of money. For that I agreed to force the quarrel . . . having been assured that the cancelling of my debt . . . would be the end of it. I was desperate, for he . . . Mascagni . . . threatened me with the galleys. The Earl . . . as he ran me through . . . laughed! He told me my death was arranged . . . my tongue for ever silenced. Panizzi found me . . . still alive. The room . . . is dim . . . the light is far away. A priest, a priest, for the love of Christ! Signor, truly have I paid . . . for my treachery. But Mascagni is . . . still before you. Who is that sobbing? Is it for me . . . for you? May Christ and the Blessed Virgin pity you and forgive me . . . ah, yes . . . forgive . . ."

The quavering voice of Rienzi ceased, drowned in a rush of blood. The horror-stricken guests hastily crossed themselves and turned away. Not in this life would Rienzi receive absolution. Mechanically, listlessly, Balsamo motioned the Nubian aside, and Mascagni, silent and cowed, his devil's face masked to the eyes by the red collar of his cloak, slunk out and away. He had not planned for this, and bitterly, deeply, fiercely, he cursed Castlehaven as he hurried on his way. On he went, fear on his face, in his heart, and gripping even the shreds of his tainted soul.

The sobered men and sobbing women quickly left the banquet chamber. They vanished with a low murmuring and whispering, a backward throwing of awed, curious glances, a soft tapping of heels and a rustling of garments. Sala bore the body of Rienzi from the room, and Panizzi knelt by the side of his master. At last, after a long silence, Balsamo's lips moved, but his eyes and form remained rigid.

"All in honour of Marie," he whispered. "But she is gone, Girolamo. My beloved is gone. Ah, Marie, my beautiful love—my life! Why have you left me chained to misery for all eternity? Alas, poor Rienzi was right. The room is dim; the light is far away. It is true, it is true, that I am but a poor cripple, a dupe, a fool. Dark are the gates of despair, darker still the region beyond. I see there no star to guide me. Girolamo, I feel . . . lost. Over me sweep the obliterating waters of hate and treachery. Alone! God has not pitied me. I am abandoned; darkness is about me; the light is . . . far away."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE bolt that had stricken Balsamo was like the livid lightning that flashes without warning from the storm-clouds, strikes down and blasts and shatters the healthy plant that a moment before had been expanding and opening to light, warmth. and life. And in that blinding, searing period of torment the nature of the man had been riven asunder. The fierce furnace heat of humiliation, passion, and despair had twisted and warped the once serene soul. The agony of mind had rendered nugatory the moral powers that from childhood had been his comfort, his support, and his faith; and had left him a mere crouching, staring being with a brain of fire and a heart that had died. He did not weep; he did not rage nor pray, but sat in a frozen silence as though entombed in the glacier of eternal isolation, a region wherein love, hope, mercy, and pity cannot dwell. Marie, Castlehaven, and Rienzi had gone, and Guiseppe Balsamo, the man beloved for his sympathy, his charity, his love, had followed after them, swept away by the overwhelming irruption of those forces of evil that had poured in upon him. Death and betrayal!

For hours Panizzi stood quiet and motionless beside the carved, high-backed chair in which Balsamo sat like a figure cut from marble. The candles in the candelabrum above burned down and went out, and the feeble, yellow light of those on the table served only to emphasize the emptiness of the vast, silent chamber. The dawn light filtered slowly through the tinted glass of the dome and revealed the wreck of dishes, the overturned chair lately occupied by Mascagni, the spilled wine and broken goblets, and the sad, drooping flowers in all the melancholy of disorder and abandonment. For hours no sound other than the breathing of the two men was heard. None ventured to disturb the man whose

heart had been torn from his breast and trampled upon before the shocked, pitying eyes of his guests. On the other side of the tapestry stood the gigantic Sala. He, too, had watched through the long hours of the night, with only the slow, regular movement of his mighty chest to show he was a living man.

The dawn of a new day! The soft rays gradually dispelled the shadows, as though reluctant to bestow their effulgence upon the desolation within the chamber, or to reveal the torment of the man that sat so still at the end of the deserted table. A night of horror, a day of despair, an empty future to be faced by one whose faith had withered, whose very roots of belief had been severed by the keen sword of treachery, for he had believed in his beloved as he had in God. He had placed her beside the Virgin. His love had apotheosized her, had, in the ethereal realm of his mind, lifted her to a pinnacle before which he had bowed down and worshipped. He had lavished his wealth, his love, and his soul upon a very human piece of clay. He remembered how she had passed between the tapestries, how she had looked long at him, and then had laughed. Laughed! The light of the new day illuminated the banquet chamber. There was no light in the heart of Guiseppe Balsamo.

He stirred, and Panizzi breathed a sigh of relief, for the strain of the long, tense vigil was beginning to make itself felt. Slowly the merchant gathered his cloak about him and rose to his feet. Not until then were the changes wrought upon his countenance observed by his companion: the lines that seemed to have deepened and lengthened across the wide brow; the thinned, drooping lips; the narrowed, fierce, gleaming eyes; and the icy expression that had frozen and hardened the once gentle features. His voice was hard and metallic, such a contrast to the soft, caressing tones that formerly were welcome to all.

"Girolamo," he said, placing a hand that was hot and

clammy upon Panizzi's, "I have been immolated upon the age-old altar of desire. It is true I was a fool. Mascagni, who is not forgotten and for whom a day is coming, plotted to bring this thing to pass. That proves that I was a dupe. Castlehaven, it cannot be doubted, has by now availed himself of his opportunity; but better far for him had he plucked the deadly nightshade that poisons the air of his country's lanes. Girolamo, the day has come, and we leave for ever this place of my shame and humiliation. After we depart I will demonstrate to you and to myself that I am no longer the dupe of man—or God!"

It was not in Panizzi's power to express the sorrow in his heart for his friend and benefactor. His quaint philosophy was barren of remedy or comfort. It could not prescribe for the soul suddenly deceased.

"Guiseppe," he murmured, his voice low and charged with feeling, "what can I say? Truly I anticipated some evil. But this! I am stunned! Words will not come to me. What are you about to do?"

"All in good time, Girolamo," was the crisp reply. "Look around you, I pray. What do you see? Ah, you do not wish to tell me, but your eyes are eloquent. You would spare me, and for that I thank you. You are the exception to the rule, my friend. But I know what you see. You see Rienzi, clad in scarlet, drinking, flushed and insolent. You see Mascagni in black, his eyes gleaming in their deep sockets, the fingers of his claw-like hands moving restlessly, gloating yet crafty with it. And Castlehaven in silver and blue, an elegant figure, smiling at me and at her, nodding, talking, drinking little and biding his time. You see a lovely woman with a mass of golden hair, and one who is her mother. But most clearly of all do you see poor Guiseppe Balsamo crouched in his chair, and between him and the woman whose eyes glow with deceit and whose red lips whisper sweet lies is none other than the devil himself, rocking to and fro with silent, gusty

laughter as he listens to the prayers of happiness that fall from the cripple's lips. Prayer! Why should not the devil laugh? Who would not laugh at the mummery of man and the indifference of God?"

"Guiseppe," stammered the trembling, shocked Panizzi, "do not utter such words. Let me take you——"

"Hear me, my only friend!" continued Balsamo. "Hear me and decide for or against me. I will do unto others as they have done unto me. After all, it is the ancient law! My thoughts, my hopes, and my wealth shall be employed in the prosecution of my vengeance. I am done with pretence, done with sickly supplication. The whole edifice of our faith from the Pope down to the terrified wretch screaming for absolution is but the result of man's supreme delusion. I am done with it! I renounce it all! The image in my room before which I have spent long hours in futile prayer may rot and moulder behind the curtains that will never again be drawn. The life beyond? Redemption? What will the subtle mind of man not imagine? What a penalty he pays in blood and tears for creating words that bind him with their spell. All my life have I been mocked; all my life have I humbly borne the sneers of the envious and the blows of them that hate me; but now, after this, Guiseppe Balsamo will be mocked no more. Girolamo, do you accompany me, or do I tread the unknown path alone?"

"Where you go, Guiseppe, I will follow. But you are distraught. Let Sala prepare the draught that brings oblivion. You need rest, relief from the shock of this thing. Ah, you laugh, Guiseppe. I have never heard you laugh like that. Your eyes burn, your lips writhe, your hands twist with frenzy——"

"Then it is the frenzy of sanity. I but required your assurance, my friend: I did not beg advice. You will remain with me?"

"Always."

"Then, come; let us leave this room of stale dreams. Let us depart from this place of laughing, mocking, screaming phantoms; this house of dead hopes; this tomb of love and faith. Give me your arm, my friend, for we go, never to return."

Part Two

MASCAGNI

CHAPTER ONE

In the dawn that followed the night of his tragic disillusionment, Balsamo, accompanied by Panizzi and Sala, walked from the *palazzo* down to the promontory that jutted boldly out into the sea. The Nubian had persisted with true African obstinacy in following his master, and at last he gained the permission that at first had been denied him. It was a quiet morning. The wind of the night had gone as quickly as it had arisen. The sea was like glass, unruffled, gleaming here and there through the transparent mantle of mist. The three men slowly descended the steps and boarded a gondola. And then the merchant's emotion mastered him. He wept.

The pap of vengeance is bitter food on which to sup, for slowly, inexorably, it poisons the brain and corrupts the heart. Of this food the cripple ate full measure. Hate ebbed and flowed through his being like the slow pulsing of a mighty tide. He dreaded the coming of night, with its phantoms that smiled, leered, and mocked : the night that came like an unclean garment to stifle him in its detestable folds, for, at the thought of it came a sense of horror born of humiliation and irreparable hurt.

Hurt, crushed, bitter, vindictive was he as he sat with Panizzi and gazed through the small leaded panes of cracked glass that formed the window of the room above the waterside tavern. Panizzi had found the place, and the merchant cared not for its evil reputation. He wanted sanctuary, and it seemed to be here in this small and not very clean room. The crucifix upon the wall he regarded as incongruous and unnecessary. He seized the image and tossed it under the couch. Panizzi shivered. He would not have dared to do that. But God would not hold that against his master, for Balsamo's mind was sick,

his reason clouded, and his heart rebellious like that of a child because of his disenchantment.

Sala, the giant, crouched on his haunches without the door. Three times had stealthy footsteps sounded on the stone stairs; three times had they paused and then descended. The Nubian grunted his contempt; nevertheless, his black eyes watched unwinkingly for the brief, warning flash of the thrown knife.

Softly, solemnly, upon the early morning air came the peal of the first bell. Balsamo's head lifted at the sound. High in the *campanile* the bells of Santa Maria delle Vigne rang out their appeal, their command; then followed the deeper tones from the cathedral of St. Lawrence; then the bells of St. Ambrose, St. Philip, the Annunziata, San Siro, Santa Maria di Carignano, until the throbbing of the bell chorus echoed far over harbour, hill, and dale.

Sad were the merchant's dark eyes as he sat at the window and gazed over the placid water. Somewhere beyond the sea-rim that bounded his vision was she who had been his betrothed, and the betrayer who had professed his friendship. Sanctuary! Ah, how good the sound of the comforting bells! Their message was a balm to soothe a heart sorely bruised and lonely. Balsamo's lips trembled. He turned to Panizzi.

"Girolamo, there is no sweeter sound," he said almost in a whisper. "Surely the chime of the bells is the voice that whispers from heaven to earth. What comfort, what hope, what peace rings in the pure notes. The bells! If they are not the voice of God, then must they be the purest song of the human heart; the very peal enters the soul and becomes a guide to the peaceful valley of rest. I would gladly enter that valley, but, alas, it is too late. For me they ring in vain, in vain."

Panizzi was never a dissembler, and instantly showed his pleasure at his friend's words and demeanour. So the black mood of the night had passed. He knew it would.

With the light of day and the sound of the bells had come sanity, resignation, and normality. True, Balsamo had thrown aside the image of Christ in a contemptuous manner, but that could easily be atoned. Worse things than that had been done, and the Church had given absolution. Panizzi beamed at the merchant as the echoes died away.

"Guiseppe, how welcome is this change in you," he said. "But you could not be other than yourself for long. I marvel that you ever thought of blood and vengeance."

"Vengeance!"

How bitterly it was said.

"Yes, yes, Guiseppe; but no woman is worth it," continued Panizzi hurriedly. "I know them. They are but Vanity and Desire, panting to vie with the peacock as he struts in the sun. No man had to do with a woman but sooner or later he found her a nuisance. That men should sweat and die because of them makes my head buzz. By the Mass, it does! This image, now. Let me replace it, Guiseppe. A shame it is——"

"Let it lie!" said Balsamo curtly. The smile faded from Panizzi's face at the peremptory tone. "Let it lie, for I am done with being a weak fool. It was ever thus with me. Forgive, forgive! And for my pains I am trampled on. Am I not here in this wretched room, hiding my head because of my leniency and indulgence to others? They laugh and have their fill, but I crawl into a dark hole to keep my shame from the light of day, to evade the wonder and scorn on the faces of those I knew: to shut out the laughter of my friends—for were not all my friends? Let the bauble lie, I say!"

The bells had ceased to ring. Panizzi sighed and stared through the dirty, cracked glass. The bells had ceased to ring! Black brooding thought was astir again. Behind the fierce eyes of the merchant were red, brightly-burning fires. Restlessly he got to his feet and limped up and down

the room. Up and down, up and down, his ebony stick tap-tapping and stabbing every now and then at the cracks in the boards. Panizzi remained silent, his eyes upon a line of chained men dragging their way towards a huge barge whereon were great blocks of marble—material, perhaps, for one of God's churches, material procured by man's agony and bound together with cement sprinkled with blood and piety. Balsamo spoke harshly.

"Mascagni, I am told, has a daughter," he said, not pausing in his limping walk.

"It is said he worships her—and only her," Panizzi replied.

"Ah, how foolish to worship a woman."

Panizzi nodded.

"To break my heart was a delight to Mascagni. We shall see how he appreciates a draught from the same vessel," was the merchant's grim announcement.

"Guiseppe!" Panizzi turned and stared at his friend. "You would destroy her?"

"Yes—and him," said Balsamo with a soft laugh.

Panizzi's flesh crept.

"But she is young, and sweet, and pure. How could you think such a thing——?"

"Have done, Girolamo!" was the petulant command. Balsamo's head was erect. He threw his arms wide and allowed the cloak to drape and hang like two black wings. Panizzi shuddered. "Am I and mine to be rolled in the filth of treachery by Mascagni while he and his stand by immune and unspotted? Am I to be betrayed for the sport of harlots and villains without retaliation? Nay, my friend! I am past submission. He rejoices in his sagacity, but was there ever such a fool! Her name, Girolamo?"

Panizzi hesitated.

"The Signorina Vittoria," he replied unwillingly. "But, Guiseppe——"

"She is beautiful—eh?"

"As she is pure. Once I saw her. I never doubted then that good can spring from evil. That such a debauched, twisted devil should have such a daughter is one of God's mysteries. But there it is. Of years she would not yet be a score. It is doubtful if more beautiful face or more graceful form is to be seen in Genoa—well, to my way of thinking. She is dark of eye and hair. Red are her soft, full lips. Aye, a pretty woman is she, round of bosom, and tall, and moulded to please a man's eye. But pass her by, Guiseppe. For all your pain and bitterness, you are not the man to destroy women. Break that fiend, her father, and I will rejoice with you. But not the maiden, Guiseppe."

"Do not preach to me, Girolamo," Balsamo retorted. "In this matter I please myself. What is a woman to me—especially Mascagni's daughter! Had he thought for me? Had he thought even for his daughter? Bah! I shall not go into the outer darkness alone."

Panizzi pursed his lips, shrugged his heavy, broad shoulders, and then gave his attention to what was passing below. It was in his mind to say more, but he had sworn to give beyond mere lip service. Balsamo was dearer to him than any woman, and it was surely the merchant's affair. Yes; truly it was Mascagni that was the fool.

Panizzi secured food and wine, and both he and the Nubian ate and drank with relish. For all their sympathy and concern, it was not their sorrow. They merely rested in its shadow. But nothing passed Balsamo's lips. He would not eat nor drink. The day long he paced the dirt-filled boards of the attic room, pausing now and then to stare out to where the sky met the sea, to where a craft fashioned by his mind bore ever farther away the woman who had laughed, the woman of the red-gold hair, the woman he had loved.

As the afternoon wore on, Balsamo's manner became more restless. He had limped miles in the cramped space

of the room. His silent, tireless energy began to fret Panizzi's nerves, and in spite of several ineffectual attempts at conversation he again spoke wearily.

"Guiseppe, for the love of God let us descend from this prison. Let us sup below. There are people below who will afford interest. A wild, cut-throat brood roosts here. It is the most dangerous place in Genoa. That is why I brought you here, for surely not in this house will any seek you. Now what say you?"

"I fear I am selfish, Girolamo. Take Sala with you. I am content to remain here in the gloom. It fits well my mood and thoughts."

Panizzi grunted and threw himself down on the rough couch. His own mood was one of irritation. He rubbed his bald pate.

"A pest on gloom and moods," he grumbled. "Keep this up and you will be a dead man. No food, no sleep, nothing but thought. It is ill-nourishment for any man's body, Guiseppe. But since you will not stir, then shall we all remain. But there are meats and herbs simmering below that make my stomach squirm. With some of it inside me I would be a new man. Why, it would even give me courage to chuck that barrel-breasted pot wench under the chin; and by the pointed tail of Beelzebub that would take courage in any man not blind drunk. But another meal in this rat-hole and I vomit."

Balsamo nodded.

"Girolamo, I will not stand apart," he said. "In the days to come we will have great need of each other. Forgive me for being so inconsiderate, but my brain is like a leaping sea on a foggy night. It would be unpardonable were I to chain you here in this room. Let us descend and eat of what is offering."

They were moving towards the door when Balsamo's outstretched hand arrested Panizzi.

"Stay," said the merchant thoughtfully. "Girolamo, we

are richly clad. What danger lies in that? Shall we not expose ourselves to the gibes and the knives of the rogues below? Not yet have I had time to perfect plans for the future."

"As to the danger, Sala and I will see to that," answered Panizzi grimly. "But I doubt not we shall escape their attention. Strange indeed are those that drift in and out of this place. It shelters both silk and rags at times. This tavern, Guiseppe, is a trap-door through which drop those that desire to vanish. Another whiff of that stew! My nostrils stretch like those of a hungry hound. An agreeable scent, I declare."

Balsamo laughed softly.

"Eat we must," he murmured, his lip curling as though at the futility of it. "Let Sala join us. He is not so savage as some. Although he will readily kill, there are greater barbarians daily thronging the streets and churches of this city. Indeed, I suspect that to kill can at times be an act of the highest merit. Alas, now that it is too late I know it."

CHAPTER TWO

THE revelation of Rienzi's dying words had been beyond the crafty syndic's calculations, but he took steps to rectify his error the moment he won free from the *palazzo*. The brain in his viper's head shrieked aloud the menace to his person and reputation. He was too well versed in devilment not to be sensible of his peril. Balsamo was a wealthy man, and wealth was ever another term for power. None gave the fact greater appreciation than Romano Mascagni the syndic. Late though the hour was when he stepped from his gondola, he went straight to the Court of Justice in the Ducal *Palazzo*. As the result of his business there,

a man sped to the Armoury near-by, and another ran fleet-footed through a maze of twisted, black alleys until he came to an inn sunk below the level of a narrow street. Down the rough, worn steps leaped this man and vanished. The lantern swinging on its iron bracket cast too feeble a glow to reveal movement beyond a few paces, yet a moment later it was unhooked and carried within. Having taken precautions against immediate danger, Mascagni went home in a sedan-chair, home to the house with the narrow porch and balconies, to the house of secrets that sheltered both vice and purity.

The information brought to him at noon the next day caused his eyes to widen with surprise; then his evil face cracked with glee until it resembled a hellish, gloating face.

"In that foul place? Then watch carefully that tavern," was his shrill, excited command. "Watch carefully, diligently, else will I have your arms torn from their sockets. Deliver this paper to the keeper of the place. Away! Away!"

So pleased was he that his limbs trembled and his lips slobbered with the intensity of his delight.

Truly the tavern wherein the three men sheltered was a house of abomination and a sink of iniquity. Balsamo had been too preoccupied when they arrived, too bowed down with his grief to observe the forbidding features of the place. But now that he had agreed to accompany his companions below he saw many things that caused him concern for their very safety. But Panizzi and the Nubian were not perturbed. They were hungry, and the eyes of hungry men are first employed in the search for food. Intent stares from curious eyes followed them, for they appeared to be an odd trio, and it was these envious, appraising looks that made Balsamo uneasy.

The room was long and narrow, and the ceiling so low that it seemed to be just beyond reach of the hand. The

stained, slashed benches, the dirty, scratched walls, and the blackened tables butting against them were most uninviting because of their doubtful cleanliness. From the massive sooty beams above hung numerous lanterns that gave smoke in abundance as well as light. The place was old, looked old, and smelt old.

Fully half the number present in the room were women, wantons and companions of criminals, bare of bosom, hard of eye, sinuous of body, and barren of soul. Like the men, they were of mixed nationality, the Italian predominating over the Spanish, French, Corsican, and the very mixed breeds of the Mediterranean. Like the men, they were also armed with the ever-ready stiletto, and these deadly, slender daggers frequently flashed in the light of the lanterns when disputes arose.

While the people of Genoa at this period preferred the Spanish mode, the garb of those who frequented this tavern of ill-fame was nondescript in the extreme. They were a wicked crew, the scourings of ports and ships, the refuse of city and countryside, and consequently their dress consisted of all kinds and conditions of ragged and odd garments: doublets, breeches, hose, shoes, hats, shirts, and cloaks of all materials in various stages of wear and tear.

The Tavern of the Three Eyes was notorious as the rendezvous of lawless and desperate men, some bland and suave, others coarse and brutal, prowlers of the night, thieves, murderers, procurers, and political agents of the type that infested the political cesspools. It was an admirable place wherein a man could lose his identity, his purse, or his life.

Guiseppe Balsamo had rubbed shoulders with many strange types in the course of his career as muleteer, vendor of merchandise, and then merchant, but never had he made contact with such assembled wickedness. The people and the place revolted him and shocked his strong, inherent sense of decency and cleanliness. It was in his mind to

turn his back upon it all, to walk from the tavern and seek other quarters, but the fear of ridicule was gripping him with hooks that pierced his sensitive mind. He would rather walk through the bubbling morass of inferno's depths than endure the cynical smiles, the careful innuendoes, and the open gibes of his own world. He knew that by this time his story would be widely spread. All Genoa would be whispering and chuckling; the Merchants' Walk would be holding its sides with laughter, and the scented boudoirs of the *palazzi* would be thronged with eager tattlers. To think of the platitudes he had mouthed! To think he gave a bouquet to another man's mistress! To think of how he had been mocked and scorned and humiliated! Ah, to think of it! Cold rage mounted as his wounded pride winced from searing thought. There were some, perhaps, who would give him their sympathy; but how that sympathy would sting! It mattered not. Be the tavern ever so foul, it could be no fouler than the hypocritical attitude of his friends. And there was work to do. He had ceased being a weak fool.

And so he followed Panizzi to a table in the far corner of the room. The great Nubian padded silently behind them. Panizzi clapped his hands and called loudly for attendance, to the amusement of those adjacent. However, there were some who showed their resentment at such a lordly manner. Black looks and hisses were directed at the trio as they seated themselves on the narrow benches. But these signs of disapprobation vanished when the fat woman, the subject of Panizzi's remarks, waddled forward to inquire and satisfy their demands. When her little beady, black eyes saw that these were men of substance and not merely wolves in the clothing of sheep they opened wide with surprise, and she instantly became obsequious and hastened to obtain the food and drink required by them. Panizzi sniffed when she left them.

"She was once a woman, whatever she may be now," he grumbled disparagingly. "We shall be lucky if she does not spit in the stew. It is a way these degenerates have of expressing their contempt for their betters. Guiseppe, I saw you closely observe our company. What think you of them?"

Balsamo laughed shortly.

"Filth," he said. "A bar of iron could be bent across the face of anyone in this room without marking the skin. Girolamo, this is an unsavoury retreat. What made it your choice?"

"Look around you. These scum of the world beneath do not know you, and this tavern is not used by those who do. You desired to disappear, so here we are. You could not vanish more completely unless you took ship and went to another country. How long we remain depends upon you, Guiseppe."

"A ship . . ." murmured the merchant thoughtfully.

"Ah! Here is our nymph with the stew. Does she not look tempting behind the steam of it? Observe the rolls of fat that shake and tremble as she walks. Verily, if she were tapped on the paunch it would sound like a drum. I suspect she has a liking for the Nubian here." Panizzi glanced slyly at Sala.

Sala merely grunted. In that instant of sound were mingled palpable dislike, a deep contempt, a profound indifference.

"Uhuh!" he grunted again, and gave his attention to the food. But he was forced to wait, for the mess was too hot for his fingers.

That meal was never eaten. Scarcely had the slattern placed the board supporting the bowls on the table when the door at the end of the room was thrown violently open. A bare-legged man, wild of eye and hair, and with tattered shirt bulging over a belt of leather, startled all with his

hoarse cry of warning. Straight through the room he sped, like one with terror at his heels, shouting at the top of his voice as he ran. He vanished through the kitchen beyond.

"The Guards!" he yelled. "Out, out! The Guards, the Guards! The German dogs and the Corsicans! Out, for your lives!"

Pandemonium followed the cry. The motley crew suddenly became possessed with the terror of the man who warned them. The fat woman squeaked over her shoulder as she fled:

"Save yourselves, Signores! The Guards are here, and that means the galleys!" Her duty done, she fought madly to squirm through the writhing mass of fighting, bellowing, cursing humanity at the kitchen door.

"But the Guards do not send women to the galleys," said Balsamo, addressing Panizzi. He wondered at the panic shown by the women.

"No, but doubtless they have other uses for them," was the knowing reply. "Sometimes they are tortured—if they are ugly or aged. It is one way of extracting information and amusement. Look at the rats! See—there a knife flashed. Heard you that scream? Someone is determined to carve his way through."

"The devil is in haste to get his children beyond the clutch of the law," remarked the merchant dryly as he sat and watched the struggles and antics of those endeavouring to escape. "But what now? By the Mass, Girolamo! They are trapped! See? There are torches in the kitchen reflecting redly on the capelins and cuirasses of the Civil Guards. Listen to the roaring of the terrified rascals. A shrewd harvest of rogues this night. We show sense and judgment in remaining still. What follows should be interesting."

The door on the street had been hurriedly slammed and barred, and the crashing of the axes as they hacked through the tough wood added to the din of oaths, blows

and screams. The affair was well planned. More than thirty men and women were penned in the long room, and when they saw that escape was impossible they made haste to rid themselves of concealed weapons. Knives, long poniards and short stilettos, knotted cords, short bars of iron and lead, and fearsome brass and iron spiked knuckle-dusters were hurriedly thrown under tables and benches. Then, as though for protection, the cornered criminals and wantons huddled together, and their faces became creased with anxiety and apprehension. Their fears were well founded, for one and all knew that the men would go to the galleys and the quarries, and the women would be subjected to other harsh measures—except, perhaps, one or two that convinced the officers commanding that opportunity and beauty were an irresistible combination.

Panizzi watched the struggles and listened in brooding silence to the wailing and cursing. Then he spoke:

"The lot of the ancient slaves of Egypt and Babylon was not more severe than the fate to which these poor dogs are doomed. In truth, there are times when it hurts to think. Look at that howling scum! They are fit for death, yes; but they will die of torture and painful misery. The republic will grind them away until nothing but the dead husk is left."

Those who shrank from the gleaming swords of the Civic Guard knew they were doomed to perish. They crowded together against the long wall, and some stared sullenly and defiantly at the men in helmets and breast-plates; others screamed awful blood-chilling curses, and others again groaned, wept, and whimpered in their despair. The gutturals of the tall German in command of the Guards did not blend well with the Genoese patois, but the officer was not for a moment misunderstood.

"Round up the dogs!" he rapped out harshly. "Separate the women from the men and close the mouths of any that scream. I search for more important quarry."

Seated quietly in the corner of the room, Balsamo, Panizzi, and Sala had been overlooked while the brawl was at its height. However, they were not suffered to remain in peace for long. The tall captain turned and saw them.

"Ho!" said he. "I had not far to look."

Balsamo rose to his feet when a file of the Guards confronted him and his companions. The tall officer glared at the merchant in an insolent, offensive manner. His pale-blue eyes were cold as they stared out from under the peak of his capelin.

"Your name?" he demanded peremptorily.

Balsamo answered quietly and with dignity. But the German was not impressed.

"I am Guiseppe Balsamo, a merchant of Genoa, and these two men are my friends," he said.

"Ho! Ho!" roared the officer. "A merchant of Genoa, eh? A merchant of Genoa in this den of thieves and assassins? Ho! Ho! A merchant claiming the friendship of a blackamoor slave? But we will soon have the truth from you. Bind them and take them into the adjoining room. The syndic waits."

The syndic! Balsamo paled, and all three exchanged uneasy glances. The merchant spoke to the officer, while his wrists were being bound.

"What is the name of the syndic that waits?" he inquired.

"It is the Signor Romano Mascagni," was the reply. "Know you the magistrate?"

Mascagni!

But Balsamo did not speak. He knew that the cowering wretches across the room were not the only ones that were trapped.

"Know you the syndic?" bellowed the officer again.

"We have met. Lead us before him. Girolamo—Sala—

have courage. We may yet break through the devil's snare."

"May God be with us," whispered Panizzi in great trepidation.

"Uhuh!" was all that Sala said.

CHAPTER THREE

It is a withering experience for a helpless pious man to step forward and face malice and designed cruelty without the comfort of God to sustain him in the hour of his acute affliction. Although Panizzi's lips moved in silent prayer as he was thrust into the square, gloomy room, Balsamo's did not, for he had hardened his heart. He would not call upon his God for support; yet he was conscious of the impelling desire to seek Divine protection and mercy. He called it habit, and closed his lips. He held himself as erect as his infirmity would permit, and the shoe on the foot of his crippled leg just scraped the floor. He was between Panizzi and the Nubian, and he gazed steadily at the man who stood with legs apart and hands clasped behind his back. The man was not Mascagni, but his swarthy, expressionless features, almost Oriental in their impassiveness, were not less hard and unrelenting than those of the syndic. Balsamo appraised the fellow in one swift glance and knew him to be a sycophant and willing tool. The merchant spoke quietly.

"Signor," he said, "we desire to speak to the syndic, the Signor Romano Mascagni. Where is he?"

For a moment the man did not reply. He seemed to be considering hidden thoughts that were masked behind his dull, lifeless eyes. Behind him was a door of dark, heavy wood. Because he knew that Mascagni was behind

that door and peeping through a hole cut for the purpose, and because he knew that satisfactory arrangements had been made to provide the unseen spectator with a sport to his liking, a brief smile twisted his cruel lips. Very chilling was that fleeting smile.

"The syndic is busy upon the affairs of his office," he vouchsafed at last. "My instructions are to question those I deem suspicious or dangerous."

"Then be generous enough to cause these things to be removed during the course of your brief interrogation——"

The swarthy man interrupted the merchant.

"Brief interrogation, say you?" he murmured. His voice was smooth, a sound of level quality, unemotional, uninterested. "That will depend upon the answers you give to my questions. Officer, bring these rascals to where the light is brighter."

"No rascals are we, Signor," said Panizzi with heat. His wrists were sore under the biting cords, and the flesh of his hands was already swelling and blue with the pressure of the imprisoned blood. "No rascals are we. All this smacks of that devil Mascagni."

"Be advised and speak not disrespectfully of the syndic. Would you have me believe it is the practice of honest men to come to The Tavern of the Three Eyes for refreshment, comfort, or amusement?" asked the man softly, his dark eyes brightening with an evil light. "Surely you could not think me so credulous. But your turn will come. This insolent fellow, the lame one, is a menace to the peace of the republic. I see as much in his manner. He will be first. Officer, guard me well the negro and the rogue with the bald pate."

"Rogue you call me?" demanded Panizzi angrily. He raised his bound hands threateningly. It was a thoughtless, foolish gesture. "But you will smart for this insolence——"

"Silence him!" came the shrill command.

And silenced Panizzi was. A blow from the hilt of a guardsman's sword knocked sound and sense from his head. He collapsed and fell heavily to the stone floor.

"Signor, this brutality is as uncalled for as it is callous," said Balsamo indignantly. "I will have your conduct accounted for. That one of my standing in this republic should be subjected to such pain and indignity is monstrous. Strike off these bonds at once, Signor! And give aid to my friend who lies a victim of your blind cruelty."

"A bold and defiant fellow," was the sneering reply. The merchant's threat had no more effect upon him than the rain upon the sea. "One of your standing, eh, villain? Your name?"

"My name is Guiseppe Balsamo."

"It has a familiar sound," the man admitted.

"I am a merchant of Genoa——"

"Ah! I wondered at the name. Do I understand you claim to be that wealthy gentleman?"

"I am that man," said Balsamo firmly.

A change came over the suave manner of the sycophant. In an instant he was transformed from calm to rage. He waved a menacing finger at the merchant.

"Now I know you to be a foul fellow, a rascal, and a liar," he shouted. "Deceive me no longer, dog! Out with the truth, or I will have it drawn from you. I will have it! Imbecile, a sad choice of names you have made. This Balsamo is a good man, the friend of priests, of abbots, even of the archbishop himself. This merchant is known for his gentleness, his purity of life and thought, and his gifts to this church and to that. Think you such a man would be found in company of all the filth that runs through this place of prostitution and crime? Nay, you must count me mad. Your name, I say!"

Balsamo looked contemptuously at the man.

"There are times when reputation is a worthless ægis. Place virtue next to vice, and fools cannot discriminate,"

he retorted. "I repeat that I am Guiseppe Balsamo, a merchant of Genoa. Why I came to this tavern concerns no one but myself. But enough of you and your insolent stupidity. Conduct us before one in authority."

"Not so fast, not so fast! I am in authority here," the man replied, his vast self-importance, his vanity, his paltry, puffed-up pride investing his tone and manner with a ludicrous pomposity. "I will give you one more opportunity to recant. The truth will save your worthless body to some extent. I begin to suspect that you have murdered the good Balsamo and stolen his clothes. Those you wear are too fine for you, fellow. Now, for the last time, speak the truth!"

"Thou art a fool," was the merchant's stinging reply. The use of the word "thou," addressed only to menials, set the underling dancing with fury. He stamped this way and that, clapping hands and roaring his orders. He threw off all restraint.

And on the other side of the closed door Mascagni rubbed his thin hands with the enjoyment of this scene. He stood in a dark, narrow passage, and the bracket lamps and lanterns joined with the red glare of the torches carried by the soldiers and sent a beam of crimson light through the spy-hole on to his face. It revealed his sharp-lined features, grinning wet mouth, and staring, grey-rimmed eyes. He had a perfect view of the proceedings. Clearly he could see the man he so deeply hated facing with calm dignity the minion employed by him; the unconscious, bleeding Panizzi stretched on the floor; the plain outline of the Nubian standing straight and tall beside his master. Behind the three men were the motionless men of the Civic Guard, their polished capelins and cuirasses as well as their drawn swords reflecting the unsteady light of the torches and lanterns. And above them all, suspended from strong iron hooks driven deep into a stout beam, were ropes and blocks similar to the kind used on the

masts of ships. The keeper of the tavern had faithfully earned his bribe.

The voice of Mascagni's satellite held a note of savage triumph. The work about to begin was as much to his liking as it was to his unscrupulous, heartless master. Moreover, the excuse for the contemplated crime was perfect. As he had never seen the merchant Balsamo, it was natural he should refuse to accept the word of anyone caught in such circumstances. As well expect the Archbishop of Genoa to begin frequenting such a house, or to accept any plausible excuse invented by the rascals who slunk in and out of the tavern. He was fully aware that the cripple spoke the truth, but that only proved the merchant to be a fool and anything but a saint.

Balsamo knew that to challenge the legality of the proceedings would be both futile and impossible. Who was to judge? To whom could he plead? His implacable enemy had determined to crush him utterly. The face of the man before him was now twisted with rage and animosity. An appeal to such a man, to the servant of such a master, would be merely a waste of breath and an exhibition of cowardice. It was Mascagni's work. The officer of the guards had betrayed that fact. In spite of his natural courage, Balsamo trembled and blanched when his tormentor's voice rang loudly in the room.

"To the strappado with him! By St. Peter and St. Paul I will jerk some of the devil out of the fellow. A bold, truculent rogue! Ho! Those three men there! To the rope, to the rope!"

The reason why their wrists had been bound so tightly now was apparent. The strappado! An instrument as cruel as the cross that crucified Christ! An engine of extreme, excruciating agony. And that was to be his reward for the truth; nay, not that: it was but the prosecution of another man's vengeance and enmity.

Balsamo glanced up. He had not dreamed that such

treatment was designed for him. He had been prepared for ridicule, for humiliation, yes; but not for torture. His mouth went dry; his throat constricted at the sight of the rope and the block with the iron hook attached to it. His breath came in gasps, and the pumping of his heart interfered with the flow of his speech.

"Hold . . . hold!" he cried, his voice merely a whisper, in spite of his brave effort. "What . . . manner of man are you? Would you condemn one who is innocent and undeserving to torture so severe? Use that machine at your peril!"

"Heed not the braggart," was the cold retort. "A little of this will bring you to your senses. You, to assume the name and character of one of Genoa's worthy men! But your natural boldness and rascality defeats your ruse. You have not the wit to correctly imitate the gentle manner and voice of the man you claim to be. Make fast the hook under the thong on his wrists!"

"No—no! Not that . . ." came feebly in protest from Balsamo's ashen lips.

"Watch the negro! Watch him——"

"Sala! Be still!" was the merchant's hoarse command. "Help for me is past, and these men will plunge a sword into your heart. Be still and close thine eyes and ears. It is me they wish to suffer . . . to . . . so be it. . . ."

Behind his spy-hole in the filthy black passage, Mascagni danced and slobbered in his crazy joy. His hands plucked nervously at his grey beard, at his cloak, and at the woodwork of the door before him. For this opportunity he had waited. Now his true revenge, the completion of that revenge, was at hand. Balsamo would suffer the agonies of the martyrs, of the inquisition, of hell itself. Joyful sight. See how the cripple shook! Mark his terror as the hook is placed beneath the thongs! Hear his strangled, pitiful cry as he is pulled high above the floor! He

dangles like a corpse on a gibbet. A pretty lesson to pious, canting hypocrites. Ah, if only he could treat all his enemies in this fashion they would soon learn not to meddle in his affairs or to thwart his desires. Balsamo's gasping was as music in his ears. He listened eagerly to his henchman's commands.

"Hold him at that! Now fasten the rope securely so that when released the rascal's feet do not touch the floor. So! Now, my lame pigeon, let us see you in flight," cried the inhuman master of this inhuman ceremony, looking up and grinning at his victim. "Be ready there! Watch closely my hand. When I lower it, let go the rope. I declare the rogue's arms shall tingle this night. Are you ready to come down, rascal?"

The hand fell; the men released the rope, and a moan burst from Balsamo's lips as he dropped. While his feet were yet a few inches from the floor the rope tautened and almost pulled his arms from their sockets. The sweat of agony bathed his face and body as he swung at the end of the twisting block, for his arms burned as though held in fierce flames.

"Up with him!" was the relentless command. "By the Mass, he likes the sport!"

A scream, shrill and piercing, a sound that came from the heart itself rang forth at the second drop. The merchant's head snapped back; his body was consumed with pain. The torn muscles of his arms, the racked bones of his shoulders and spine suffered indescribably. His froth-flecked lips were drawn back over bared teeth; his eyes that beamed so mildly and so kindly were now dulled and lifeless and filled with sweat and anguish. They were turned up until the exposed whites resembled those of a blind man. His legs, the maimed and the sound, dangled helplessly, nervelessly, like those of an uncontrolled puppet. He tried to cry aloud, to implore their pity, but his tongue could utter no words.

Again and again he was raised and allowed to drop. This continued until he uttered no sound, until his awful cries ceased, until he hung limply from the end of the block. Unconscious, he was past pain. The ghastly, fiendish sport was finished.

Seeing that further punishment was useless, he was lifted down from the block and carelessly thrown down beside Panizzi. The inquisitor, for he was that, gloated over him, and in the contemplation of this horrid work did not at first hear Mascagni's dry, cackling voice.

"I am but returned," said the syndic, striding in his bent, crooked manner across the floor. In the silence his shoes rang on the hard, bare flags. Here and there on his black coat were strands of spider's web, picked up as he brushed against the walls of the rat-infested passage. His cackling voice continued: "But I must depart at once. Urgent matters press. Hand these dogs, whoever they be, over to the keeper of the tavern. He will revive them, and you can return when he calls. Give the rogue this purse."

Mascagni flung the bag of money to his man and then left the room. He was satisfied and in haste to depart. The object of his hatred and malevolence was at last broken. Balsamo would trouble him no more. He had arranged secretly for that. Sala's eyes were like live coals under their lowered lids, and it was fortunate for him that the syndic did not observe their wicked glance. Had he done so, the Nubian's career as a useful man would have ended there and then. But the slave was not worthy of a look.

Mascagni would not have passed from the room so contemptuously, so complacently, had he dreamed that deliverance for his victims was at hand and would come from a source unimagined by him. The one pail of water served to revive both Balsamo and Panizzi. Their eyes opened to see a crouching, grinning, ape-like fellow standing over them. Balsamo groaned and again swooned,

but Panizzi struggled to his feet with an exclamation of dismay. Close to him stood Sala. The others had gone, leaving them to the mercy of the keeper of the tavern whose appearance fully justified the sinister things said about him. Panizzi's wits were reeling as he turned to Sala.

"What devilment hath passed here?" he croaked, his bound hands pressed to his aching head. The pain of the blow made the room swing dizzily before his eyes.

Sala did not speak, but his eyes and head were slowly raised. Panizzi followed the glance, and a cry of horror escaped his lips.

"The strappado! By God! They have given him the strappado!" he gasped, starting back at the audacity and enormity of it. He was appalled. "Fiends! Devils! Execrable monsters!"

The keeper of the tavern chuckled.

"And there is more in store for you, Signor," he was pleased to inform Panizzi. His whining voice grated on the ears of the two men.

Panizzi's eyes swept over the absurdly richly-clad apparition. Here was one on whom vice and crime were plainly stamped. But why had the fellow said that? What motive lay behind that tone and crafty leer?

"What is to follow?" Panizzi's voice was as steady as the fear in his heart would permit.

"Death at the oar in the Spanish galley now waiting beyond the mole. It has been arranged, and the vessel awaits you. A large sum of money was paid, but for me it has not been a profitable day. Is the Signor rich?"

Panizzi studied the man. The manner in which the words were spoken, and the greedy light in the cunning eyes gave him thought. Money had the power to work miracles, and nothing less could save them. Death at the oar! A cruel fate, for, once chained to the benches, they could never return. It would indeed be the end.

"To outwit our enemies we would double, even treble,

the sum," he said hastily. A pleading note crept into his voice.

Again the keeper of the tavern chuckled. Then he was silent, and the suspense was maddening to the two men. But at last he appeared to derive satisfaction from his thoughts.

"There are many zechines to pay, Signor," he said, showing broken, dirty teeth in a wide grin. "But, after all, it is a matter of business, of price. Flesh and blood are profitable commodities, and always will be. There is nothing better or easier to make money out of."

"The money can be got," Panizzi hastily assured him.

"Then, come. That stingy, tight old Jew has a close purse," was the reply. "He never pays enough, and money is money—both his and yours. But one cry from you, Signor, and that oar——"

"You are safe," said Panizzi. He breathed a deep sigh when a keen knife cut through the cords that bound his wrists. "Lead us from this place of torment, and I vow you will not regret it."

Sala stooped and tenderly lifted Balsamo, and they entered the dark passage lately occupied by Mascagni. Panizzi prayed an honest prayer as he stumbled along.

CHAPTER FOUR

ROMANO MASCAGNI sat at the table of grey-veined bardiglio marble in the room with the floor of parquetry. On the table before him were a decanter and goblet of Venetian glass. He was drinking, and he was alone. He leaned forward in his chair with his legs crossed. One arm, with the hand clenched, lay on the cool surface of the marble; the elbow of the other arm rested on his thin knee, and the bent fingers of the hand pressed against his dribbling

mouth. He was deep in thought. Lately, meditation had become an oft-recurring habit with him, and for hours at a stretch he would sit brooding in this attitude, eyes half-closed, narrow back bent, sometimes even tearing at his finger-nails with savage teeth. When engrossed in this fashion, only two things had the power to rouse him. The first was the voice of his daughter, and the second was the sound of the bells.

How he loved the one! How he hated the other! The bells to him were harsh and accusing, each peal a word of denunciation and condemnation. They never rang now but he saw through a wine-created mist the dim figure of a cripple in black limping across the inlaid floor. They brought his victim from death to life. Then he would laugh and snarl and drink, drink with the tremendous eagerness of one tormented with insatiable thirst, drink until the glass fell from his hand, and he, in turn fell from his chair. Then Balsamo would leave him. Then his daughter would come and tenderly lift him to his feet. Up the solid carved stairs she would support his reeling frame, and would weep over him as he lay in a stupor on the great, massive, silk-canopied bed. There he would remain behind the drawn, black curtains of velvet until his brain cleared and his hand became a little steadier. Then would the devil again possess him and cause him to be a terror to his household, to all except his daughter. He was never cruel to her.

He was considering many things as he sat there in the quiet room, and time was one of them, time and the changes it brings. Eleven months had passed since the night Balsamo was tortured, racked, and broken by the diabolical strappado, and there had happened in those months many things that could not be explained. Balsamo was dead. That was certain. A cripple such as he could not possibly survive the body-breaking slavery of the great oar. In any case, the captain of the galley had been paid

to drown the merchant. That being so, who was it that mysteriously directed and controlled the cripple's affairs? Who had received the power to sell his *palazzo* on the promontory, and from whom? Panizzi? But he was also in chains. The Frenchman now in possession, the gay libertine from the court of Louis XIV, for all his flippant, careless manner had a close mouth on the subject. And Balsamo's ships were increasing in size, number, and activity. His man, the same fellow that had previously spoken with authority for the merchant, still received and dispatched men and ships, still spoke as one in authority. The affairs of the dead ran smoothly and with ever-increasing prosperity. How was that? Truly it was perplexing.

Even more bewildering was the unaccountable decline and failure of the affairs of the living. Mascagni's ventures were becoming stagnant one by one. Instead of being profitable concerns they were now a drain on his purse and on the purses of his associates. These men were loud in their discontent and disapproval. Their ships, and they were now few in number, were for some inexplicable reason rapidly becoming rotten and foul; and, at most times, it was difficult to obtain crews for them. They soon had a bad name. Captains and men deserted in foreign ports, some of the vessels had been burnt, and one had been beached and looted. How could any man conduct his business profitably under such conditions?

But the greatest blow fell when he was deprived of the office and dignity of syndic. A strong hint that could not be ignored had been dropped. Rather than dare face the matter he had resigned. He was no longer a magistrate of Genoa. He blamed Castlehaven for this disaster, for had the Earl disposed of Rienzi according to plan there would have been no suspicion, no busy tongues, no haughty glances from cold eyes. That scene in Balsamo's banquet-chamber had been spoken of and a remorseful dying man does not lie at such a time. Mascagni regretted his

association with the Englishman. Cursed heretic! But his hatred for the cripple had carried him beyond his customary prudence.

Mascagni drank greedily.

It is strange how a man's reverses cling and drag at his heels. He that walks with adversity walks alone. It is strange also how keen is the perception of friends at such a time, for even before the money is wholly gone they have vanished. An unsuccessful man is avoided like one with the plague by all except other failures. And who wants such men for companions or friends? Thus the circle completes itself.

Mascagni was quickly discovering that he was now an unwanted man. The loss of his prestige and power as a magistrate swept away all the fawning tools and satellites that had cringed and run at his nod and call. He was now ignored, insulted even by them. He was hissed at in the streets, hooted and spat at on the very steps of the cathedral, and was the recipient of black looks and angry words whenever and wherever he ventured forth. It was galling. It was also dangerous. The snake with the drawn fangs is impotent, and he had lost the fangs of power. There were weeks at a stretch when he had not the courage to leave his house, for he well knew that injured men have long memories and sometimes long arms.

Again he filled and emptied his goblet.

In the short time of eleven months his affairs had created such anxiety that he was seriously considering the advisability of leaving the city of Genoa and settling in some quiet, secluded place. He was no fool. He knew he had a well-merited reputation for cruelty, avarice, and rapacity; knew also that to remain was to invite the reckoning he feared and dreaded. And he was still a rich man. Surely it was time to go. He must get away. Away! Something within was continually warning him, urging him, driving him to depart from the city that had been squeezed

by him as strong fingers squeeze an orange. The instinct of self-preservation spoke to him with no feeble voice. His own terrified eyes had seen the long poniard embedded in the wood of the street door. A little time and another such as that might find its way to his heart or to the heart of the daughter he idolized. He knew the satisfaction of wounding through another, the subtle cruelty of it.

His hand shook as he raised the decanter. His lips quivered when the goblet touched them. A thin trickle of wine ran down his beard and dripped and splashed on to his quilted robe. Fear was now the dominant emotion within him, fear for himself and for her, for the daughter whose pure and sheltered life knew nothing of passion, violence, or death; whose heart was fresh from the gentle, loving care of the Brides of Christ. For himself he was terrified; he could not breathe when he thought of death; but for Vittoria, for her preservation and security, death would be a price he would unhesitatingly pay.

He shuddered and swallowed wine.

That poniard! Any one of a hundred hands might have thrown it. He could not tell. Many were the men he had trodden under a relentless, haughty, ruthless heel. The main stream of his wealth was swollen by the tributaries of extortion, blood, and cruelty. He loved his money, but he worshipped his daughter; and it was all for her. Rich would she be, and beautiful; the superior of any woman in Genoa; the fairest bloom in a republican garden of fair flowers. That poniard!

He drank more wine.

His beard was stained and wet. Go he must, or the result of delay might prove appalling. There must be no further delay. And he would journey to where there were no bells, no haunting voices and visions, no laughter of the dead or limping cripples; to where peace brooded over meadow, leaf and stream; to where the birds called, the trees whispered, and the fine mist cooled the brow; away

from insult and indignity, from blow and curse, from the poniards of unforgettable men; away, away, far away from the corrupt, miserable, sanguinary past. Away!

He drank deep of the wine.

Mascagni's head fell forward on his arm. The goblet overturned, rolled in an arc of a circle, and then crashed to pieces on the floor.

CHAPTER FIVE

To the eyes behind the stars, man's life is evanescent, a moment of joy and sorrow and pain, a living screen of bright and dark colours that fades all too quickly. Yet man, perhaps because of the courage that is his, or his egotism, is not always conscious of the transitory nature of his existence. He is busy. He is building with bricks upon stone, with steel upon granite, and with happiness upon hope. He is making use of time, and rarely heeds its passing.

It was time that betrayed Mascagni. It was his inability to read the future that caused him to delay his return from the green, fertile fields and pleasant streams of Lombardy. He had found his retreat, and nothing frowned upon its sylvan beauty but the mighty snow-streaked Alps of Southern Switzerland. Here, indeed, was serenity and rest. Here was refuge from the assassin's blade. Here, the only disturbance would be the falling of a tree, the crashing of the distant avalanche, or the storms of heaven. The cool wind from off the snows was like a new breath of life, so laden with vitality, so clean, blowing away with its sweet breath the miasma of the past. Here, he could live in peace, and Vittoria would be by his side. Refuge! Thus did Mascagni plan.

Mascagni arrived at his house in Genoa in the dusk of an October evening, one year from the night on which the insensible Balsamo was carried along the black passage in The Tavern of the Three Eyes. Coincidence? Fate? Or the eyes behind the stars?

The whilom magistrate was in a pleasant frame of mind as he stepped from the stuffy confines of the sedan-chair. He astonished the two stalwart bearers by giving them an additional reward for their services, and left them gaping after him as he hobbled up the slabs to his door. They were amazed and delighted. But they did not know that the clean wind from the Alps was still in his lungs: that the green, brown, and purple hues of Lombardy were yet bright in his mind; and that the sense of peace, of rest, of joy, of something akin to grafitude still exercised a softening influence upon his spirit. Not in fifty years had his warped, dark, twisted nature expanded to embrace a little of the beautiful in life. It was a brief moment of transformation, yet sufficient to set the hard, cruel lips smiling. Money did not make that smile; gain was for once absent from his thoughts as he lifted the heavy iron knocker, and it was not vengeance or greed that caused his grey-rimmed eyes to shine with a strange, bright, unfamiliar light.

A brief transformation, a fleeting metamorphosis. The bearers in the narrow, gloomy street stood with bared heads until the stout door closed behind their patron. They were awed by the miracle of his generosity. Yes, they knew Mascagni. Scarcely was the door shut when they lifted the chair and ran down the winding, cobbled, shadow-filled street, fearful lest the donor should repent his action and demand his money back.

But Mascagni was thinking only of his daughter. He took off his hat, cloak, and sword, and handed them to the man whom Castlehaven had thought so garrulous and indiscreet. His shoes clattered on the marble in the vestibule. The servitor followed humbly behind, his

features composed, his eyes downcast. His master had the disconcerting trick of turning swiftly and sweeping keen eyes over anyone behind him, and swift and harsh was the punishment to any that gave offence.

Mascagni smiled almost genially as he placed one foot on the bottom stair. His hand rested on the carved newel. There was love and affection in his heart; his seamed face was smoothed by the lively emotion of joy, and his eyes glowed with the anticipation of again beholding his daughter. His harsh voice called eagerly to her:

"Vittoria! Vittoria! Hasten down to me——"

"My master," interposed the servant, for he had news to impart.

"Be silent!" Mascagni's voice became tinged with its habitual irritability. Again he called to his daughter. "Vittoria. Answer me! Why do you not answer me?"

Never before had his voice failed to reach her ears or to penetrate the door of her room. She had always replied to his summons. The house was strangely silent.

"But, but, master; the Signorina Vittoria is not here," the man managed to stammer. It was dangerous to speak when bidden remain silent.

"Not here?" Mascagni turned. His face became creased with its old lines. "What mean you by that?"

"I—I—but, Signor, you sent for her——"

"Sent for her . . . ?" His voice rose to a scream. A hand of ice gripped his heart.

"She told me, and at noon she left. A chair awaited her. An hour after she had gone a letter was delivered. It is for you, master——"

"The letter, fool! By God, make haste before I kill you! Blind you are, and deaf, and incapable! A plot! An imbecile to let her go! The letter, the letter, I say!"

It was Mascagni's turn to stare into the pit, to stand with chilled blood, and to watch with glaring eyes the evil that writhed therein. His tongue licked lips that for once were

dry. His mind knew a bitterness that was worse than death.

The voice of the servant recalled him to life.

"Master, the letter——"

Mascagni tore the letter from the man's hand. He was white with fear and trembling. When he read its contents he became quiet and still. His life seemed to leave him. The letter fell from his curved fingers and fluttered to the floor.

"Master, I did not know——"

"Fool!" Mascagni bellowed suddenly. He spat upon the man and then dealt him a blow that brought the blood from his lips. The servitor recoiled and cringed. He feared for his life. None but a madman could look as his master looked at that moment.

"My hat, my sword! A chair, dolt! God blast you, a chair, I say! Ah . . . ! May the heavens, and the earth, and the hell beneath be rent——"

The servant turned and fled, his hands to his ears to shut out the sound of raving and awful cursing. His master had suddenly become insane. None but a damned, fiend-ridden soul could utter such fearful imprecations. Out into the dim, moonlit street he raced, his flying feet hardly touching the ground, his terrified heart almost bursting. On he went, and on. He did not return to the forbidding house wherein he had slaved for the best years of his life. In his blind fear he had found the courage to rebel. But his quivering lips whispered his regret for the beautiful Signorina Vittoria. She had been gentle and kind. He panted a swift prayer, and it was simple and sincere.

When Mascagni came stumbling down the steps of the porch, the man had vanished. Not even the echo of his footsteps came back along the street. The black, slanting shadows cast by the young moon had enveloped him. Mascagni peered this way and that; he raised shaking

hands to heaven and cursed it; and then he, too, panted his way along the street. He looked like a black bat in the faint moonlight, a repulsive bird of prey flapping its way down between dark, close walls of rock. His thin, crying voice hailed a chair. The harsh note had gone.

"A felucca! And run! A zechine for every minute you save me," he sobbed as he collapsed within the chair. He could not say more. The words caught in his throat. He fought for breath, and clawed at the curtains of the chair to steady himself.

Zechines! The sedan-chair went down to the harbour like a released boulder down a mountain-side. The stout bearers were gasping when they set it upon the ground. But they had earned a princely payment.

The words of the letter were burning into Mascagni's brain as he stepped aboard a felucca and shrilled his instructions. They explained all, yet they told nothing. A price had been mentioned. A price! The words were the only ray of hope in the darkness of dread. He would give all for his daughter. All! Would it be enough? He shuddered. He tried to shut out from his mind thoughts of the time when he had asked a price, and for a woman. Ah! How he had laughed and mocked and snarled, and had got either the price or the woman. It was easy to send a man away in chains. Would he be mocked? Would he be laughed at? Would he be forced to see——

"Faster, faster, for the love of the Virgin," he implored, his upturned face grey and gleaming with sweat.

Far out on the water shone three pin-points of light. Several miles of sea had yet to be crossed.

"We cannot go faster," was the unsympathetic reply. "Have I wind in my belly to help fill these sails?"

Mascagni steeled himself to wait. He sank into a lethargy, and the torpor prevailed until the felucca grazed

the dark side of a tall ship. He looked up. The masts seemed to rake the very stars. He gazed in horror at the gun ports.

"Vittoria," he whispered.

Above him a man laughed.

CHAPTER SIX

MASCAGNI was profoundly ignorant of what was before him as he stepped upon the deck of the armed merchantman. The letter he had received bore no signature. He did not know who had done this thing. His heart pumped madly, and his brain created terrors that were almost overpowering. The climb up the swaying, yielding rope-ladder had been an ordeal. Once he had paused and looked down. Beneath him was the felucca, made fast to the side of the ship, rising and falling and crunching against the fenders of rope that had been placed between the two vessels. He had nearly fallen. His head swam dizzily, and when strong hands gripped him and lifted him over the bulwarks he had to summon all the strength of his will to stand upon his feet.

He stood panting for a moment, fighting to regain his breath and some measure of composure. He glanced at the two men that stood beside him. One of them held aloft a lantern, while the other, without asking or waiting for permission, reached for the sword and threw it into the sea. Quick, practised hands searched for concealed pistol or poniard. Unarmed, helpless, he stood on the deck for what seemed to him an eternity. His straining eyes probed the ship in the gloom. Among the shadows he descried a group of interested seamen near the door of the forecastle. They whispered together. The roped guns crouched on their carriages like brooding, sullen, sentient creatures. And

there were three decks on which these monsters waited, monsters that at the touch of the linstock belched forth their deadly breath, their blackened lips licked by crimson tongues. A large ship. The towering masts, fore, main, and mizzen, supported a vast intricate network of shrouds and rigging. The sails drooped from the wide yards as though eager to drop and spread to the breeze that whined through the ropes. The ship was square-rigged, fast-looking, capable, and of fully eight hundred tons burthen. On the taffrail, high above the decking of the elevated, ornamented poop, three great octagonal lanterns burned brightly. Just above them, in the dark ocean of space, floated the crescent moon. The sea was steady, yet the ship was restless like some great bird of the wastes anxious to spread its pinions and be away. The beak gently rose and fell, and the glistening spray-drenched figure of the laughing mermaid bowed ceaselessly to the sea. The truck nodded to the stars; the ropes whispered in their blocks, and the timber of masts and yards, gun-carriages and superstructures, creaked and rasped in a petulant manner.

"Are you Mascagni?" the man with the lantern demanded.

Mascagni nodded. Now that it was too late he wondered why he had not enlisted the aid of authority. What could he hope to do alone? But that letter had contained an unmistakable threat.

"You are expected," he was informed.

"By whom?" he quickly, fiercely inquired.

"You will see. Follow closely, for there are some here that would gut you like a fish were they to recognize you."

The words were accompanied by a grim laugh.

"My—my daughter?" Mascagni's voice quavered. It sounded thin and far away.

"How should I know? Think you the master brought her here for my pleasure? Doubtless you shall see. Come!" How hatefully the fellow laughed. A desperate-looking

ruffian. He had the neck and shoulders of a bull, bare, curved legs that were hairy and scarred, and bare feet of enormous size. What a fellow to be under control, and what a man to control him! Yes; indeed he would be a master who could master this man.

Mascagni followed in silence, bowed, drooping, listless, and afraid to the roots of his being, a changed man. But a little time ago he had been arrogant, harsh, vengeful, cruel, covetous, unfeeling, and unscrupulous. Now he was the personification of humility, despair, fear, and dread; a bent, hobbling figure craving to withdraw from the gaze of men; no longer a tyrant but a father hyper-sensitive, suppliant, and pitiful; a shocked, numbed, palsied pleader sweating and shivering with anxiety for another, for one in whom his queer love was centred. Did he ever in the past dream that he would be slouching along the dark deck of a ship, alone, surrounded by hostility and menace, miles at sea, unguarded, a prey trembling in the claws of an unknown enemy? Did the haughty syndic at whose nod men smiled and at whose frown men trembled and shuddered ever dream that? Had he done so, he would have laughed his grating, cackling laugh at the sheer absurdity, the impossibility of such a ludicrous situation.

He seemed unaware of time or place as he shuffled along behind the rolling seaman who swung the lantern, unaware of the tall, wry-necked fellow who followed at his heels like a shadow, unaware of the knife stealthily drawn from the concealment of an armpit, unaware of its swift, upward flight, unaware of everything until he was suddenly brushed aside and the fellow's wrist caught in a grip of iron. With the danger past he squealed in his terror. The man with the thick shoulders and bare, curved legs snarled at his companion.

"Have done!" he cried, his voice like a rasp. "Had I not luckily turned you would soon be swinging by your heels from the high point of yonder mast. Well, you know

what that means. There you would stop until you withered in the sun and wind, a dangling bait for the ripping beaks of the sea-fowl. There you would swing until the bones of your vanished body fell one by one into the sea, and not even the devil himself could gather them up with so many miles between."

The wry-necked man squirmed in the grip.

"What care I? Has not my brother rotted in chains for this filth? Gladly would I swing at the mast-head could I strike but once, but once!" he cried. There was intense regret in his deep voice. He had failed. His squinting eyes glittered evilly in the dim light, stared like the eyes of an adder.

"Too easy for him," growled the burly one. "But remember this: he is to suffer and you will keep your life. Away below with you—but first your knife. Your knife, I say! And keep your twisted mouth shut."

The powerful man was obeyed without further question or demur.

Mascagni was lifted from the gun-breach on which he had collapsed, swept off his feet and carried along the few remaining yards of deck, and then thrust roughly through a doorway. The door closed silently behind him. He found himself alone in a richly-furnished cabin, beautifully panelled in ebony and ivory, strewn with the softest of eastern rugs, and brilliantly lighted by a lavish supply of candles that were grouped in silver brackets round the walls. On the splendid table of West Indian mahogany, its polished grain agleam in the light, were two tall, silver candle-sticks. Between them was a decanter of red wine and a single goblet. Mascagni leaned his back against the door, his eyes half-closed, scarcely breathing, waiting. But his weary eyes failed to discover any trace of his daughter, and his ears could detect no sound of her voice, no sound other than the rather melancholy wash of the sea as it swirled about the great wooden rudder beneath the cabin.

Alone! And he was to suffer! Ah, could he but embrace his daughter, could he but know she was beyond all menace he would gladly suffer. Then it would matter not. He had lived his life. What were the few remaining years? A little time to nod and drowse in the sun, a short while to enjoy the love and care of his beloved child. But, it would not matter.

"There is wine on the table, Signor. Pray help yourself," said a gentle voice.

Mascagni stiffened. Who had spoken? The cabin was empty save for himself. He looked at the table and saw the wine. But who had spoken?

"Do not hesitate, Signor. It is a reflection upon the host. You have praised and drunk my wine before," the voice continued. It sounded near yet far away. It had a familiar ring yet was unknown. It was a strange voice, not friendly, not hostile, quiet even, unhurried, impersonal.

Yet Mascagni was anything but heartened. For some reason the level, disinterested tone was not reassuring. With an effort he replied.

"Reveal yourself," he said hoarsely. "Would you torture one so helpless? Where is my daughter? What have you done with her? Where is——?"

"All in good time, Signor," the quiet voice answered. "But it is indeed a coincidence that you should speak of torture. Please remember that word. You ask me to reveal myself, but I fear to shock your eyes. You mentioned torture. Yes; were you to see me you would start back in horror, for I, Signor, have been cruelly, unmercifully tortured in days now past. A friend once assured me that one day life would deal me a buffet, and on that day my eyes should be opened. Ah, you start. My good friend also urged me to drink to one I loved, to drink long and deep, long and deep. Ah, Signor, your memory is stirring. I now ask you to drink to your beautiful daughter.

There is the wine. Drink it. Drink long and deep to her future happiness."

"Balsamo!"

It was a terrible cry that burst from Mascagni's lips. He moaned as he pressed against the door.

"The same, Signor. I am Guiseppe Balsamo. I did not die. You spoke of torture. Mind you this night a year ago? What happened then? You, of course, have never seen a man's arms jerked until they snap and are broken. No. You have never stood in a narrow passage gazing upon such a sorrowful spectacle? No. You are not familiar with the strappado, the devil's gibbet with its dangling, sweating, screaming, insane burden? No. Reveal myself? Ah, but I am not pleasant to look upon, Signor. Your daughter, alas, shrinks from me. But that was to be expected . . . at first."

"Come forth! Come forth!" Mascagni shrilled. He lurched like a drunken man to the centre of the cabin and stared wildly about him. "Come forth, Balsamo! No, no! You lie to me! You are not Balsamo. He is dead, dead!"

But he was answered by another.

"Father . . ." it was just the faintest echo of a young woman's voice.

"Oh, Christ! Vittoria . . . Vittoria, my daughter. . . ."

Mascagni dropped to his knees beside the table. His face was covered by his thin, clawing hands. He did not hear the faint click of the panel lock, did not see the panel slide open, to reveal and admit Balsamo, Panizzi and Sala. They moved to where he was kneeling, but he did not look up. He was swaying from side to side in his misery.

"Look up, Mascagni!" commanded Balsamo. "Look up and see that I am Balsamo. Look up and see what you have done to me."

Mascagni dropped his hands and looked. Then he closed his eyes. He sighed. Crouched upon his knees,

with his hands outstretched and his eyes closed, he looked like a miserable, aged man begging alms. And begging, pleading, imploring he was, although he spoke no word. Every line of his spare frame, a frame now shaken by deep, harsh sobbing, was eloquent of mute supplication. Balsamo's voice went on quietly, inexorably:

"Signor, the sight of me unnerves you," he said. "But there is more than one man on this ship who has suffered at your hands, tasted of your justice, and cried aloud to God at the agony of the punishments you have inflicted. See this poor, wrecked body of mine? Mark you the stiff arms and leg, the spasmodic twitching of my features, convulsions that came when certain controlling nerves were snapped that night a year ago. You will not have forgotten Castlehaven—or the woman of the red-gold hair? Have you anything to say to me? No sorrow to express, no regret to utter?"

"For myself, I ask nothing," Mascagni managed to whisper in reply. He still knelt before Balsamo, still kept his eyes downcast. "My day is done. But I plead for my daughter. She has harmed no man. Do not harm her. She is but a weak child——"

"A weak child?" Balsamo laughed softly. Mascagni winced and shrank back. "But I fear she may have your instincts, Signor. She is your daughter. The sweetest of women have the power to work mischief, to break men's hearts, to transform them from good men to raging devils. She is very beautiful——"

"The price! The price you spoke of!" interrupted Mascagni feverishly. "What must I pay so that she may go unscathed? Name the sum and I will agree, even though it leaves me in rags."

"Listen to him, Girolamo," Balsamo murmured. "He offers me money. Money! Nay, Mascagni, money is not the price you will pay."

"Then . . . then name it," Mascagni jerked out.

"Your death, Signor. I desire that," Balsamo calmly told him. "During the year that has passed, things with you have gone from bad to worse. I am responsible for that. My agents, backed by my money, have destroyed the roots of your enterprises. All that you have lost is due to my work. Cruel, unnatural man! Your power, your icy hauteur, your insatiable appetite for evil practices, are curbed and destroyed. Your crusted heart and foul mind would still continue their detestable work were I to permit it, for it is your very nature, your blood, your soul. But I will not. This night shall put a period to it all. The life you will lose will be taken by——"

"You would kill me?" came the frenzied shout.

"Nay, Signor——"

"Then . . . ?"

"You will kill yourself, Signor," was the even reply.

"Kill myself? Destroy what little chance I have of heaven? I—I could not!" Mascagni cried desperately. "My soul would rot for ever."

"What matters it? Mine is in hell for evermore—is now, and shall ever be. For my blasphemy, for my awful arrogance, for my terrible mockery of God, I shall suffer. For me, I fear, there is no redemption. But that is your work, Signor. You have done that to me."

"I cannot! I will not do it! Kill me, have me slain, but my hand shall not rob my soul. I swear it!"

"Then you must depart from this ship; you must go as you came." Balsamo's tone was one of finality.

"Leave your ship? I—I do not understand. Do you mean that I shall go free if I refuse to take my own life?" Mascagni looked up. He was amazed, bewildered.

"Yes."

"And Vittoria—my daughter——"

Balsamo laughed.

"You will go alone, Signor."

"Ah, devil! I knew it! You would destroy her——"

"Your decision, Signor, if you please? The wine in the decanter is poisoned. It is my wish that you drink, long and deep, to your daughter's happiness. What will you?"

"Poison!" Mascagni gasped. "So that is it! Ah, crafty cripple!"

"It is simple, Signor. And it is that, or it is——"

"No, no! The wine, the wine! I will drink, I will drink! God pity me! But my daughter?"

"Will join you in the felucca below when you have swallowed the wine. Sala! The decanter and glass! Mascagni, the Nubian prepared the draught. He is skilled in such matters. He assures me you will live to see your daughter safe in her home."

Mascagni directed a baleful look at the Nubian, a look of terrible hate, horror and black despair. He struggled to rise, but only succeeded in falling back. Panizzi stooped and lifted him to his feet. He swayed, and for a few moments could not stand without support. Then the dregs of his courage returned and he stepped back a pace, shivering, coughing, chattering, gasping.

"You will release her? You will not trick me?" he croaked, shooting fearful glances from Balsamo to the wine.

"I fear my word must satisfy you, Signor," Balsamo returned mockingly.

"Then God have mercy upon me. The wine . . . the wine!"

The red wine sparkled as it flowed into the goblet. Mascagni's shaking hand spilled a little of it, for Sala had filled the glass to the brim.

"It is the end! Vittoria . . . it is . . . for you," he whispered.

Silence followed the bitter voice. The goblet glittered in the mellow light. Mascagni crossed himself and drank. Then, tottering backwards, he hurled the goblet at the

panelled wall. He rocked on his feet and glared at the glinting pieces of broken glass.

"It is done!" he screamed. "It is done! . . . Christ!"

Mascagni looked like death itself as he stood there swaying on his feet. No vestige of colour remained in his grey, sweating face. Brow, cheek and thin, sharp nose were drawn in pain, scored with the lines of age and dissipation that were suddenly deepened by terror. A little while he stood in that tottering attitude, his arms outstretched, his dark cloak hanging wide, his narrow back bent, his head craned forward on his wrinkled neck, his eyes, those terribly cold, grey-rimmed eyes, almost bursting from his skull. His thin fingers clawed the air, opening and shutting convulsively. His mind was confused, whirling, seething, like the roaring water of a maelstrom, echoing the profound, dreaded reverberations of death. Nothing now could warm his cold, labouring heart, not even the blood that raced in his blue, knotted veins with the heat of molten metal, not even the embrace of that sweet daughter for whom he had given his life.

"It is done!" he cried again, his thick voice choking.

Balsamo again laughed, yet reluctant admiration gleamed in his dark eyes. Mascagni had given all. The merchant bowed and then limped towards the sliding door.

"Farewell, Mascagni," he said, the mocking note gone from his voice. "I bid you a long farewell. Girolamo, see that the young woman is taken safely to the felucca. Signor, farewell."

The panel closed behind him. His face was grave and sad as he paused and stared through his cabin window. The two long, white candles, one on each side of a silver crucifix, diffused a soft light. Down on the dark horizon the red moon rested on the rim of the sea.

"The fiend will probably die of fright," he muttered, laughing shortly. "How could he know the draught was

harmless, a simple concoction of bitter though safe herbs? Evil he is, and he thinks all men are evil. Yet truly he loves his daughter with a love strange and fierce and deep. A queer thing is the nature of man, unfathomable, God-given, devil-ridden. But worthy is she of a better love, for she is a sweet, pretty maid with a gentle manner and a pure mind. Alas, like myself, he is completely broken. His miserable life is worth nothing to me, and he is welcome to what is left of it. But it was a pretty lesson, and I vow it has been well learned. . . . The moon lights a lurid track, a dancing, beckoning path. England lies that way, and calls insistently, for there, also, is she of the red-gold hair. Poor Marie! How soon did she gather the fruits of vanity and passion? What thinks she now of the poor cripple she scorned? . . . I wonder. But my bitterness has passed, though not my love. I know not why, but that I cannot kill. My love for her . . . after all that . . . it is strange."

News of Marie had reached him. It was her great distress that had turned virulence to pity. Then came compassion. He had not rejoiced. Before the symbol of Christ's supreme love and sacrifice he crossed himself and bowed in silent prayer. Hate, that for a brief space had filled his heart, had passed away. Vengeance had quickly been as vinegar in his mouth. He now sought but justice, for even God, thought he, would grant he was entitled to that.

. . . . . .

Sala leaned over the bulwark and stared down at the departing felucca. Beside him was Panizzi. They could just dimly see two figures locked in each other's arms.

"A thousand pities to let that dog go," Panizzi complained to his companion, his arm outflung in the direction of the felucca. "Guiseppe should have flayed him alive. But instead he merely forces good wine down the wretch's withered gullet. A fright—bah! A shock, yes; but

Mascagni will soon recover. What is a shock to him? Pah! The herbs will not even make the rogue vomit. Ah, little one, you had a lucky escape. Had it been another man—ah, bah!"

"Uhuh!" grunted Sala. It sounded as though he agreed.

"Ten thousand pities thou didst not drop some real poison into the drink," continued Panizzi, frowning at the vanishing vessel. His scowl was one of implacable ferocity and resentment, his attitude suggestive of baulked purpose and desire. Then he started back in amazement, for Sala laughed. Sala laughed! It was like the laugh of a triumphant though disobedient child.

"Sala!" hissed Panizzi, gripping the Nubian's great arm. "What meanest thou? What devilment is behind thy laugh?"

"Uhuh! I will tell thee, for only I know," said Sala. "The wine was poisoned. In truth it was. Uhuh! It was easy. Mascagni will die in the dawn. A rare poison . . . and cruel."

"Sala! Hast thou—" Panizzi paused. He gaped at the grinning Nubian, his fierce rancour giving way to incredulity, and incredulity to animadversion.

"Uhuh!" grunted Sala again. He was greatly pleased with himself.

"Verily the way of the heathen is dark, even as we are told," growled Panizzi, scowling at the giant. "Blood-thirsty savage! Sable Borgia! If thou wert not now a free man I would have thee whipped. Hath not thy gentle master turned again to his God? Is he not fasting, and praying, and striving for his redemption? Slowly his soul is returning to him, and with what pain! And now this!"

Panizzi was sternly censorious.

"It was for the master," said Sala simply, his smile fading. "And, by the sacred wings of Al Borak, I would do it again! It was Sala, not God, that carried the master

from the place of his torment. It was Sala, not God, that mended those broken arms. Uhuh! It was Sala, not God, that saw him suffer, heard his bones snap and his screams. It was Sala that watched his agony, and saw the triumph in Mascagni's eyes, the cobwebs on his cloak, the purse he flung as the price of his pleasure. It is just that he should die! Uhuh! The master is a good man. Should he then be the sport of the devil? Uhuh!"

The Nubian drew himself erect. His mien was one of quiet dignity and native grace.

Panizzi's bald pate nodded. He had nothing to say to that. Nevertheless, he felt that Sala merited a rebuke of some sort.

"Who is this Al Borak of whom thou speakest so much?" he asked irritably.

Sala's eyes brightened. Here was a topic dear to his wild heart.

"Al Borak flew to heaven with Mahommed seated on his back—" he began earnestly.

"Pshaw! Stupid fool!" sneered Panizzi. "Thou hast too many religions on the tip of thy black tongue. Away with thee!"

He was still rubbing his bald head when Sala turned and left him. Then he quickly crossed himself. The felucca was out of sight, and the singing wind that drove it moaned a requiem.

Part Three

CASTLEHAVEN

CHAPTER ONE

In the year 1660 John Steele, foundling, was the proprietor of a little shop in Paternoster Row; a shop wherein irregular rows of books gave a literary flavour to what otherwise was a jumble of strange collections of china, furniture, bronze, brass and iron ornaments and utensils, and even clothes and weapons.

The narrow-fronted Elizabethan shop had a low doorway, and its floor was slightly below the level of the street. A metal sign hung over the square glass panes of the front window, representing an open book with a great key across its pages. The shop had originally been a bookshop, and John did not remember when his master, his guardian, or his parent—for many years he was not sure which—first discovered that things other than books held profit. Nathaniel Baxter was a kindly little man, quick tempered and impatient, yet full of contrition and sympathy for the waif he had succoured. Very silent was old Nathaniel, as he was known everywhere, and very noisy and vociferous was young master John. In his smiling, irrepressible manner, John had asked searching questions concerning his origin not long before the quiet old man's death. He was forced to be content with this reply:

"I have taken you in, young John. I have been greatly bothered with you. But, lad, I am not displeased with you. I will tell you that you are of good birth. But, beyond that, ask me nothing further, for nothing further shall you learn, unless it be the conduct of this business. And in this be diligent, for The Sign of the Book and Key has found favour."

The shop, the business within, and the gable above, were now his. To John's surprise, old Nathaniel had willed all to him, to the man who had neither kith nor kin that he

knew of. Still, thought he, the strange old fellow had to leave it to someone, and, as far as he was aware, none had ever approached Nathaniel Baxter on matters other than business. John had never felt lonely, so it did not occur to him that his benefactor might have had lonely, empty, cruelly desolate moments, and that even a foundling might in time fill a tiny place in the gap left by another.

The old man's regard for his books might be gauged from the fact that, next to God, he believed them to be the most potent and precious power in the lives of men. Year by year he had intoned their virtues, and John, perforce, had listened to him. But master John was not always amiable or impressed by their hidden qualities, not until the day when master John was no longer young.

Nevertheless, John Steele appreciated their current market value to a shrewd degree. He had a good head for the buying of things, and a better one for the selling of them. He was a good trader, and always bright and cheerful with his customers. In his shop in Paternoster Row he was happy without knowing it. It was sufficient that he was a member of his Guild, that his business provided bodily comfort and mental employment, and that his health resisted the many diseases that ever lurked in the City's dirty, overcrowded, cramped streets.

Life loosed its first serious shaft at John Steele on that extraordinary day of rejoicing, the 29th May, 1660, the birthday of the returning Charles. The Royal wanderer was this day to be hailed as England's sovereign and welcomed with extravagant joy and acclaim by the populace of London and Westminster. Only those die-hard army derelicts, inflexible intransigenists, who had for ever destroyed their chances of future government by their recent acts of violence, oppression, subterfuge and glaring incompetence, held aloof. Even the Puritans were glad to shake the army from their shoulders. Perhaps the greatest tribute England ever paid to the recently-deceased

Oliver Cromwell was that in their despair her citizens again called a king to rule over them.

In the early morning of the memorable day John Steele threw open the windows of the gable above the shop and, clad only in a short, woollen night-shirt, leaned well out over the sill and beamed down upon all below. He had been awakened by the bells of London's many churches that roused him and the remainder of London's citizens, —a wild, joyous, clashing, jingling, clanging, crashing, tinkling, metallic pæan that heralded the coming of England's future monarch.

A pleasant face had John Steele. His features were the lively, clean-cut features of the healthy Englishman. As he gazed upon the gathering, hurrying, laughing throng below, his merry, blue eyes sparkled with anticipation of the day's joy to come. He was thirty years of age, broad of shoulder, and strong, but his height and his habit of stooping slightly sometimes gave the impression that he was older. In trade, of course, he was serious, but it was a mischievous sedateness, and his spirit seemed all the time like an imp trying to escape from the imprisoning bottle of necessity.

He lingered a while at the window and then closed it. He carefully made his bed, scrubbed himself from head to foot in a not-overplentiful supply of water, dressed with care, and then critically surveyed himself in the cracked, square glass that stood on the squat, oaken chest of drawers. His reflection satisfied him. The steeple-crowned, broad-brimmed hat was vigorously brushed and set on the back of his head. His collar was of plain white linen tied with tape, and it rested upon a brown, sleeveless coat, buttoned down the front and pointed, the severity of which was relieved, or emphasized, by the green and red-barred sleeves of his underjacket. From his shoulder hung a short, black overcoat, but the sleeves with the turned-up cuffs and buttons were never used. John was pleased with his

appearance and, after one self-satisfied pat on the top of his steeple-crowned hat, he turned and made for the stairs.

"Breakfast forthwith," he muttered cheerfully to himself. He bent and locked the door of the shop. "And then to see all. Hark ye to the bells, John; to the babble of tongues; to the cries of the bread-and-meat vendors that have been astir all through the night; to the clatter of hoofs and the rumble of wheels. 'Twill be a merry day an' I doubt not a drunken one. For the nonce the business of books an' baubles must rest. Where eat ye, John? At the Chapter Coffee-house in the Row? Nay, the Chapter be always to hand. Let's stretch these long legs awhile. By Eleanor's cross in West Cheap there be a snug crib where they broil a fat steak that drips in a vastly teasing fashion. A steak an' a posset! There's a man's food. An' cannot a bookseller be a man? Rot me, we'll see!"

He sniffed in the morning air, heavy with the smoke from busy fires, and then took the two steps before him in a stride. And then he paused. Leaning against the window of the shop opposite, the house of Vargo the whisperer, was a poorly-clad woman, alternately talking and sobbing. She gazed in tearful appeal at Vargo himself, who was endeavouring to comfort her. People stared curiously, and a few stopped to listen. Then, with a nodding and a whispering, they went on their various ways. John hesitated and then approached them. He nodded to Vargo, who was known to everyone for his kind heart and for the strange collection of birds that fluttered and screeched in their cages. Vargo was a birdseller, and his shop was the rendezvous of all the children of the neighbourhood and many of the adults.

"For why is this good woman lamenting, whilst all others laugh and smile?" asked John. The woman's face seemed familiar.

"Ah, Master Steele, Master Steele, never again shall I

smile or laugh," was the broken, pitiful reply. "They be gone—my two boys—my sons——"

"Why 'tis Mistress Bonney that keeps the pastry-stall hard by Stationer's Hall," interrupted John in a tone full of concern. "What misfortune has befallen?"

"Have you seen my children, Master Steele?" the woman asked, her manner almost frantic.

"I have not—" began John.

"Then I must away! I cannot tarry. They be lost—lost——"

John turned to Vargo the whisperer when the distracted woman turned and ran from them. She cried aloud the names of her sons and peered to left and right as she ran along. Her eyes were wet with tears and her shrill-calling voice was heard long after she vanished from sight.

"What be amiss with the woman? 'Tis likely they have but run away to see the City," said John.

"I fear they be kidnapped, Master Steele," Vargo whispered. "Ah, this sinful City be full of cruel men, and 'tis amazing the children that be snatched up and away. I would have prayed with her, but she would have none of it. Perhaps, even now, her sons be captives aboard a merchantman bound for the West Indian plantations. 'Tis monstrous that little children be sold into vile slavery. 'Tis cruel, and yet it be God's Will——"

"God's Will?" cried John in protest. "Nay, that cannot be. 'Tis the devil's work. The blessed St. Matthew himself has told us in his gospel that Christ proclaimed his love of little children. Nay, good Vargo, I think ye be in error there."

Vargo the whisperer drew himself to his full, lean height. His words came hissingly, but the sibilant sentences were at first unheard, because of the sounds in the street and the shrilling and screaming of the caged birds in the doorway and window of the shop.

Mark Vargo was a tall man, thin to the point of emaciation, with burning, dark eyes that were the more impressive because of the abundant snow-white hair that gave him a patriarchal appearance. His friends said that the queer light in his eyes, and the expression on his thin, kindly face, were the manifestations of holy zeal; but his enemies said they were only proof of his madness. Whether his friends or his foes were right, there undoubtedly surged in the man a force that was impressive, in spite of the handicap of a mutilated tongue and throat.

"Aye, glory be for ever to the Lamb of God," he hissed. "But, Master Steele, ye forget that God permits Satan to live so that men be tested in the fires of sin. God in His mercy grant that poor Mistress Bonney find courage and strength to bear this trial that be come upon her, even as He sustained me when bitter men bored through my tongue with red iron and tore my throat with iron hooks. Think ye I complain because my voice be destroyed by the cruel steel? Nay, young man! Poor Mistress Bonney, poor little children."

"Aye, poor woman," said John. "Pray you be mistaken, good Vargo, and that her two little sons be but playing a childish prank upon her. But I, too, am hungry. Good morning to ye, Master Vargo. I bid ye a fair day."

Vargo the whisperer smiled benignly and seated himself on the short stool just inside his doorway. His venerable white head shook slowly from side to side.

" 'Suffer the little children to come unto me'," he hissed, his head still swaying. "Aye, they be beautiful words—most beautiful words, my Vargo."

CHAPTER TWO

ANGELO'S ale-house in West Cheap was rapidly acquiring fame for its tender, succulent grills, its wonderful lobster dishes, its foreign wines and English ales, and its cheeses, sauces and salads. The swift service insisted upon by its suave English-speaking proprietor, its cleanliness and, above all, its cheapness, were important factors in its growing popularity. It had that true Bohemian atmosphere created by a restless, variant clientele, a thick, odorous haze arising from stewing herbs, and grilling meats, and mixed drinks. The house was neither inn nor tavern in the strict sense. It was something between the two, a concession to widely-divergent tastes. Angelo, the short, stout, sallow Italian proprietor, was an amiable and experienced host, and it was an irrefrangible rule of his that should a customer once offend by disturbing the peace of the house the man must leave and never return. One could complain at anything, but not at anybody. The rule was appreciated and respected, for it ensured that reasonable persons could eat in peace without fear of bared knife or flying bowl. And, in the year 1660, this was a condition greatly esteemed.

The polished black oak pews, or stalls, high-backed, like those in a church, stretched down one side of the long room and were so arranged that they formed cramped compartments, wherein men sat comparatively free from draughts and inquisitive stares. Apparently all were filled with hungry men when John entered. He was disappointed. He stood and gazed and listened to the hum of conversation, the scraping of feet, and the clatter of knives, forks and mugs. At the other end of the room a fire roared in a wide, open hearth, and the flames leaped

up from the red faggots to the sizzling meat on the grids. A man equipped with a long, white cap, a long fork and a clean apron presided here. Half-way down the room, close to the wall opposite the tables and stalls, was a large, heavy, carved sideboard of handsome design, and on it were piled plates and mugs, cold, delicious-looking rounds of beef, cured hams that were pink inside and most tempting to the eye, and here and there the broken carcass of a bird. Here Angelo was in command, dressed in a white, smock-like garment that covered breeches and hose and all but touched his shoes, and it was he who carved and sliced and judged his customers' preference and taste to a nicety. His over-garment suggested the priestly alb, and his rotund figure, his short, thick neck and legs, and broad, fat features strangely likened him to a furtive, smiling abbot as he cut and sliced and glanced this way and that and kept a merry, watchful eye upon his contented clients. There were no women employed at Angelo's, for he declared that men cannot eat steadily when glancing at a pretty woman, and if the woman be not pretty, cannot eat at all. Besides, he desired peace.

John was on the point of turning away, when Angelo attracted his attention by waving the bright carving-knife at him. The Italian had a pleasant voice and spoke English remarkably well. He knew John by name.

"This way, if you so please, Master Steele. If you do not mind sitting with foreign gentlemen, a seat you may have—yes?" he called.

John had no scruples about sitting with foreign gentlemen. He was very hungry, and the sight and smell of the food were most tantalizing.

"That they should be accepted by Signor Angelo is enough for me," he replied with his ready laugh.

"Ah, ah, Master Steele! A tender, juicy portion for you this morning—no?" chuckled the proprietor.

Angelo beamed at the tall Englishman and led him to a

stall opposite the sideboard. And then, after pausing to enjoy the look of astonishment on John's face, turned and spoke in his own tongue to the bent, black-garbed man who sat with two companions.

"Signor, the sight of the giant blackamoor fills the Englishman with amaze. But he is good company, and it will favour me if you permit him to eat at your table. Perhaps, Signor, this man may be able to help you in your quest. He is familiar with these parts."

Angelo smiled and shrugged his shoulders in his most winning manner. He had learned the trick of shrugging from a Frenchman who had first cheated and then insulted him. He found it a most expressive substitute for words.

"He is welcome, Angelo. Sala, move thy great bulk and make room for him. Does he speak other than the English tongue?"

"I think not, Signor. Beyond a little Latin, necessary to his trade, and his own English, he is dumb. He is a bookseller and has his own business, and he also sells odds and ends and occasionally employs an author of little or no account. But your English is a match for his, Signor," Angelo finished generously. Then he turned to John, who was showing a little impatience. "Master Steele, the Signor Balsamo is a gentleman of Genoa and my friend. Listen well to any question he may put to you, and for your courtesy you will earn the best that is in Angelo's—yes?"

"'Tis easy to listen, Signor," John replied as he sat beside the Nubian; "but 'tis not always easy to answer. The Signor Balsamo may command me an' I will do my best. An under-tone fillet, Angelo, an' a sack posset, as usual. The quality I leave to you."

"And I have a white sauce for the fillet, the like of which does not exist in London. The oyster and fine shredded lobster are but two of the ingredients, Master Steele. Yes; only a few do I favour with it," said Angelo. He turned

and waddled away, brandishing his knife and calling loudly to the presiding genius at the grids.

"Sir," said Balsamo, quite winning John by his gentle manner, "you heard our worthy host? But perhaps you do not care to listen?"

"I am all attention, Signor," John assured him.

"My thanks to you. Angelo is a cheerful babbler, yet a worthy man and considerate. He spoke of a quest. Yes, it is that, Master Steele. For many months have I and my two friends here searched with patience and diligence."

"Who do you seek, Signor Balsamo?"

"A woman," was the soft reply. "And my efforts have been unavailing. I can find no trace of her. She might be dead—though God in His mercy forbid. She has vanished utterly."

"A woman? Perhaps the Signor's sister?" John's curiosity was aroused. He looked from one to the other.

Balsamo shook his head. The Nubian sat motionless, his bowl pushed aside, and his huge, muscular arms folded and resting on the table before him. The third man, a thick-set, bald-headed, powerful fellow, with deep little eyes and a bulbous nose, continued to eat his food.

"My friends cannot speak English," said Balsamo, noting John's inquiring look. "No, the woman is not my sister. Know you, by any chance, the Earl of Castlehaven?"

John laughed long and heartily and then, seeing the blank, weary look in the eyes of his interrogator, quickly apologized.

"Your pardon, Signor; but I fear you imagine I move in exalted quarters. I know an Earl? Not I, not I. I have heard of him—who has not? But I have no dealings with the nobility and they none with me."

"Ah, I understand. You are of the people, of course. I but ventured the question."

And for some reason obscure to John the little man in black assumed a distant manner that was noticeably cold.

John thought that Signor Balsamo, like all these foreigners, was unnecessarily touchy and sensitive. He was not aware that he had given offence, unless his laughter was the cause of the other's sudden icy demeanour. Perhaps he should not have laughed, but how was he to know?

"Would you care to describe her to me, Signor? Perhaps I have seen her," he said hastily, not wishing to wound the strange man, for he had observed sorrow behind the hauteur of the lined, twitching face.

"I fear any description of mine would not do my friend justice," was the quiet rejoinder. "And, furthermore, Master Steele, it is unlikely that you have seen her." He then spoke to his companions. "Girolamo, Sala! Let us depart from this place."

John rose and stood aside to allow them to step from the stall. He was conscious of a rebuke, and his merry spirits were somewhat damped in consequence.

"Signor, if I have offended—" he began humbly. He now saw that he had hurt the man in black.

But beyond a slight bow he was vouchsafed no reply. Supported by the strong arms of his friends, the cripple in black limped from the ale-house into the street, leaving both John and Signor Angelo gaping after him.

"Girolamo," sighed Balsamo as the three walked slowly through the inquisitive crowd towards Lombard Street, "I am again unnerved and distraught. I could not endure the laughter of the Englishman. It was so natural, so free from care, so full of the confident scorn of virile manhood. Innocent laughter, perhaps; but how cruel! When he laughed I could have wept. Laughter . . . and in what condition is she? What support, what comfort has she? There are times when I dare not think. To the ship, Girolamo, to the ship. We will not again go to the house of the Dutch painter, for my picture is finished. I am strangely at peace on the water."

Panizzi nodded but did not reply. To him, this

England was a cold, grey land, peopled by stern-faced, sombrely-garbed inhabitants. Its mists, shadows and drizzling rains oppressed him, and he longed for the warmth, light and colour of his native southern country. Here he felt that he was little more than an automaton, and but for his abiding affection for Balsamo, his predilection for the strongly-hopped Kent ale, and the fact that the English wenches tolerated bald heads, he would have fled the country; which proves that he was not altogether disconsolate and that his discontent was tempered by occasional compensations.

John quickly became aware that the proprietor's attitude towards him had changed. Angelo set the steak and posset before him without a word. John stared hard at it and then at the Italian.

"Oh, rot it, Angelo!" he ejaculated. "D'ye call this under-tone?"

Angelo grunted.

"But the sauce, Signor?" John inquired, looking at the meat before him. "Where is the tasty sauce you promised me?"

Angelo shrugged, spread his hands, and then grimaced.

"It is too bad, Master Steele; but I now find there is no sauce. Is it not too bad—no?" he muttered. He inhaled a deep breath and then went back to his sideboard.

"'Tis a curst twist in the turn of affairs," grumbled John dolefully, drawing from his pocket the leather sheath containing his knife and two-pronged fork. He gazed at the steak in melancholy fashion, no doubt visualizing and mentally tasting the sauce with the ambrosial flavour. But the steak was as black and as dry as a chip, and the delftware on which it lay was cracked and chipped.

Angelo again shrugged when John approached him, paid his score and then walked from the ale-house in silence.

"The devil! May he come here no more!" scolded the fat proprietor. The bright carving-knife rasped on the

steel until the tall, broad-shouldered Englishman strode out of sight past the diamond-paned, smoky window.

CHAPTER THREE

THE personality of the cripple in black had powerfully impressed itself on John's mind, and as he walked towards the Conduit he thought much upon the man and his odd companions. However, even the strong impression faded and was at last dispelled by sounds and scenes around him. The day held a promise of sunshine and warmth. Summer was coming. The blossoming, perfumed gardens on the banks of the Thames, the fresh, unfolded leaf in the field, parkland and bosky lane, the darting, warbling birds, the clear, human eye and smiling, red lips, the quickening pulse and eager glance, and the ringing laughter and twinkling, dancing feet, were but part of the universal response to God's generous miracle.

John Steele's lips were smiling, his heart rejoicing and his clean, manly spirit embracing the influences of the season and the day as he mingled with the crowds in West Cheap. Gone was the grey, numbing winter, and gone the gloom of martial rule. Late spring held out its dainty hand to early summer, and summer and the king were coming together to London. The populace danced in the streets and sang, linked arms and capered in their delight, and drank deeply at the ceaselessly-running fountains and casks that furnished the copious supply of wines, ales and spirits, until their heads were dizzy and their legs unsteady. And the day was just begun.

Before he reached the Conduit he decided to retrace his steps and dispense with his heavy cloak. So he crossed the road again and walked westward. He had no desire again to meet Angelo's stern, reproving eye.

It was but a few minutes' walk to The Sign of the Book and Key, and John covered the distance as rapidly as crowded West Cheap and Paternoster Row would permit. As he emerged from his shop he saw Vargo the whisperer beckoning to him. The old man was entertaining happy children with stories of birds and by showing his fluttering captives to their wondering, youthful eyes. The din in the shop was ear-splitting. The room was crammed with cages large and small. All the beautiful rainbow birds of Britain seemed to be within. Imported canaries flashed their yellow breasts and sang lustily in competition with the lark and sleepy nightingale. Rooks croaked dismally and their black eyes stared unwinkingly before them. Huge, grave, ruffled owls, despairing of peace, drowsed as best they could. Bright birds from the Indies, from India, and from Africa fluttered like living jewels from ring to perch. A solitary golden eagle brooded in silent, aloof majesty, ignoring the incessant, impertinent remarks of his neighbour, a lively crow with a split tongue that had been named "Vargo's lad" because of the treatment it had received.

Vargo had difficulty in making himself heard. He drew a letter from his pocket and handed it to John.

"You, be going to see the king?" he hissed, smiling and patting John on the shoulder in a paternal manner. "Would you give this to Mistress Sissmins in Paul's Walk? Ah, thank ye, Master Steele. 'Tis considerate of ye."

"I will deliver it for ye, Vargo," John replied. "But what like is this Mistress Sissmins?"

Vargo chuckled, and spluttered, and hissed.

"Annie Sissmins be no beauty, Master John—nay, not now. She be an old crony now, and keeps the provision-stall in the west end of Paul's Walk. Ye'll find it just in from the portico on the west front of the fane. An old friend of mine be Annie Sissmins, but no beauty, Master Steele—huh! hs-s-s-s-s-s!"

Vargo's laugh was a dreadful hissing cachination. The sight of the mutilated tongue in his mouth made John's blood run cold. But the old man quickly restrained his mirth, possibly considering it unseemly in one so deeply religious as himself. He continued his conversation. "Annie and me was sweethearts long years agone. But she was pretty then, and she paid for it—huh! hs-s-s-s-s! Ho, ho! No, no, lad! It wasn't me. It wasn't me! God forbid! Bold though I was as a lad, I hadn't the pluck—no, no, no! I do get saying the wrong things. Times I be fair mazy. Look at yon ruffled owl. That be like Annie, if Annie had feathers on—hs-s-s-s-s! A wise one she be. Now look at yon eagle. That be Annie when roused. Very fierce be she then. But she will live, and the eagle will die, for it cannot be tamed. Annie was quickly tamed—hs-s-s-s-s! Annie wears only grey, and be grey herself. Her eyes be large for so old a woman, and her nose be hooked like the beak of that bird. Aye, her once-lovely form be bent, her once-pretty hand be gnarled and withered—like mine, Master Steele. Time and men be cruel to women. Ye'll know Annie. I be greatly favoured. Thank ye, and God's blessing go with ye."

John had gone but a few paces when he felt a touch on his shoulder. He turned, to see Vargo standing before him with anxiety in his queer old eyes. He was trembling and his white hair shook.

"Ye'll not forget to give Annie that letter, Master Steele?" He whispered hoarsely. "Ye'll not forget it, or lose it?"

"That I'll not," John emphatically assured him, wondering at the old man's concern. "I'll give it to her in but a few minutes. Have no fear for the letter, Master Vargo."

And Vargo turned and shuffled back to his birds.

John laughed and continued on his way. He turned into Paul's Alley and strode along until he came to the north-west corner of St. Paul's Cathedral. The crowd was

very dense. St. Paul's churchyard was thronged. The grand colonnade of Inigo Jones's beautiful though inappropriate and inharmonious portico seemed to spring up from black soil, so thick were the people between the corinthian columns. John looked up and saw that the great, gaping central tower of the cathedral, now without its superb Gothic spire, held tiny, moving figures in its mouth. Had the daring climbers been able to perch on the sloping buttresses and on the numerous crocketed pinnacles they would have done so. The people were like countless summer-flies, or a plague of restless, black ants, and the buzzing of their talk was like the droning of innumerable fast-beating wings on the air. Here, as in West Cheap and the other streets, the chimneys, gables, roofs, doorways and the windows were all flaunting streamers and coloured banners, carpets, and thousands and tens of thousands of gaily-coloured flags and rags. Everywhere was wild excitement, eager expectation, and restlessness. Shouts, cries, screams, giggles, roars of laughter, songs and shrill whistling echoed and re-echoed again and again. Feet scraped and fingers snapped to the scratching wail of a fiddle played with frenzied effort by a hunchback, whose flying bow and fingers hardly seemed to touch his fiddle. John thought it likely that the subterranean St. Faith's, the small fane beneath the mighty St. Paul's, would soon be crowded with drunken revellers whose revelry had gone, but whose splitting, aching heads remained. With many the king would be forgotten before he had been seen.

John Steele shouldered his way through the crowd and ascended the steps of the portico. He was hailed by strangers; offered food and drink by persons unknown to him; caught, held, and even kissed, by gay, hysterical women whom, for the moment, he chanced to please. His blushes and his shy reception of these unlooked-for favours brought forth ripples of laughter that followed him

across the portico into the comparative gloom of Paul's Walk. The nave was alive with people. Had some fabled giant of Olympus at that moment lifted the roof from the great cathedral the scene below would, to his eyes, have resembled a disturbed ants'-nest packed with restless creatures.

Vargo had spoken truly. John had no difficulty in recognizing Annie Sissmins. The old woman was bent and wizened and grey. To John's eyes she did not appear over-clean, but this did not prevent her from doing a lively and profitable trade. There was a small crowd at her stall, and he pressed forward until he rubbed shoulders with an exquisite who, apparently, was not altogether pleased with the shrewd questions being asked by the old dame.

"Why am I not with Charles?" he was saying in reply. "Why, rot me, m'dear, I thought all London knew. Ah, wise Ann, have you so soon forgotten the words poor Strafford echoed? He said: 'Put not your trust in princes, nor in the sons of men, for in them there is no salvation'. 'Tis true, my withered Ann! 'Tis lamentably true, m'dear. We quarrelled, Rowley and I. I have been here some weeks, unconscionably dreary weeks, for the lady over whom we split, remained over the water. What chance has a mere Earl? Misfortune dogs me!"

"You mean the foreign one—" tittered Annie as she employed eyes, hands and tongue.

"Nay, m'dear; 'twas another. But the foreign one also hounds me. She is shrewd and quick, and by this has learned enough of the tongue to be importunate and dangerous. I cannot lose her. But by this her resources must be at an end and so must she. A pretty jade, but tiresome. Still," here he whispered softly, "there's always Vargo. Faugh! Such constancy in a woman is unique. It is disgusting. 'Sblood! Truly am I between Scylla and foul Charybdis. My blood! 'Tis wearisome, m'dear."

The elegant speaker kept flicking imaginary specks of dust with a dainty kerchief of Mechlin lace. He quite ignored those adjacent and gave the impression of aloofness, of being one apart from the vulgar crowd about him. He was distant and magnificently superior in a deliberately offensive manner.

"Constancy, m'lud?" old Annie shrieked with laughter. "Hate, then, old witch! Aye, she hates me now, the little fool, as though I were to blame. 'Sfish! 'Tis true I lied to her, but what of that. A woman expects naught else, and what man is there that doesn't lie to a pretty woman? Sink me! They like it. But enough of this idle chatter. Has the letter from Vargo——"

It was John who interrupted. Tired of listening to all this vain, vapid and nauseous talk, he turned impatiently to deliver Vargo's letter and, in so doing, inadvertently trod heavily upon the white velvet shoe of the splendidly-dressed gallant beside him. Events then moved so quickly that for a time he had only a blurred impression of them. He found himself looking into the furious face of the haughty dandy, a face that was bold, handsome and fearless, but marked with loose living, arrogance, intolerance and cruelty. Then a hand gripped him by the throat and attempted to shake him as a terrier shakes a rat. But John was anything but a rat, and he struck the hand from him with such force that the haughty one was sent reeling against mother Sissmin's stall. The provisions shivered under the impact and, to the intense delight of the onlookers, a larger jar of pickled gherkins emptied its vinegary contents upon the costly habilaments of the nobleman. His plumed hat, doublet of wine-coloured brocade, blue satin breeches and hose were splashed and saturated. Annie Sissmins gave a shrill cry of rage and terror. Her horrible hands became crooked like the talons of Vargo's eagle and her staring eyes glared with malice. But with

the others it was different. A shriek of merriment arose. Loud, boisterous laughter rang out on all sides. The crowd pressed itself into the form of a ring and, after the manner of crowds, gave advice to the principals in certain facetious and unmistakable terms.

"A brawl! A brawl!" rang the quick, elated cry. Men shouted at the two in the swaying ring and at each other. Already wagers were placed as to the outcome of this affair. Women screamed with excitement and a delighted blood lust, and their scathing witticisms and caustic comments were such that John's ears burned with shame.

"Who is the fellow?" someone plaintively inquired.

"Which one? The lout or the Earl of Castlehaven?" At which there was more laughter.

"'Twill sarve the fule right an' 'is ludship crops 'is impident ears," growled another charitable observer, a porter waiting to be hired.

"Strike, your lordship! Crop him! Pink him! Split the insolent clod!" came from various points of the ring. Those who shouted seemed proud of the opportunity to address an aristocrat. Here was something to boast of in days to come, something at which to swell the chest and puff the cheeks with pride when dangling gaping, listening children on the knee. The crowd drew in its collective breath and gasped when Castlehaven drew his sword. He was almost choking with fury, and had not yet regained his aristocratic poise. The mob stared expectantly, wondering what would be the fate of one who dared to strike an Earl and then drench his clothes with pickle. No doubt many of them expected to see John shrivel and vanish before their eyes.

John looked about him. He was unarmed and the crowd was manifestly against him. It would amuse them to see his lordship do a little neat sword-play; a little prick of the

blade, a little blood, and then a humbled man on his knees, craving pardon. John addressed himself quickly to his adversary:

"I gather, from what has been said, that ye be of noble blood," he said quietly, his voice steady, his body erect and poised.

"What then, sirrah?" snapped his lordship, flexing the pliant blade with trembling, impatient fingers. Never before had he been so humiliated before the eyes of the public.

"This! That England's noble blood must have turned as sour as the pickle dripping from you when such as ye, my lord, draw upon one unarmed and defenceless. I can face the steel, but 'tis a cowardly advantage ye take. But if ye persist, my lord, let us step before the high altar yonder, an' there ye can add another witness to your chivalry."

For a moment there was an amazed silence. The crowd was momentarily stunned by John's words. Then came a sound like a sigh, and then a roar of approbation from the fickle mob. Here was courage! Here was a man and no lout! The lad was right. What had they been thinking of to side with this flushed, murderous rake who would attack an unarmed, honest citizen? Personality and fearlessness had veered them as the weathercock is veered by the fresh, compelling breeze.

"'Sdeath!" breathed the Earl. He was quite taken aback by such cool effrontery. But he saw that John's daring words had found favour with the crowd, and, although the aristocracy, even at this period, was a highly-privileged class, there were limits beyond which no aristocrat might step with impunity.

"The lad be right!"

"'Twould be plain murther!"

"Let be, m'lud, let be!"

"'Twon't do, your lordship!"

"Put up your steel—tyrant!"

So came the buzzing chorus. The ring began suddenly to narrow, and Castlehaven saw the movement. Affecting nonchalance, he sheathed his sword. None but a fool would provoke this rabble, and his revenge would keep and be all the sweeter. His voice was cold and venomous as he addressed John.

"The action was involuntary," he sneered. "You are mistaken to think I would soil my blade on you. 'Sfish, fellow! 'Tis a good sword and has tasted richer blood than any you boast. But I demand an apology."

"It is your due, my lord." John's tone was as icy as the Earl's. "Had ye been reasonable I might have apologized ere this—for treading on your foot, that is——"

"Reasonable? Split me! What damnable insolence!" was his lordship's acrid comment. He wished himself well out of this situation. He was not in the least afraid, but he realized his impotence in this closing human ring; and, more than that, he was aware that ridicule must be his if he did not quickly withdraw. He was not afraid of the mob, but he was terribly afraid of the wit and satire of his own exclusive world. How the merry, careless Charles would laugh! How the sardonic James would snigger! How deadly would be the malevolent Rochester's lampoon! How the privileged ladies of that esoteric circle would titter! He could already hear Buckingham's droll voice saying with deadly effect: "I'll be eternally blistered if it isn't Gherkins himself." It must not be!

"My lord, I apologize," said John. "An' I trust the vinegar an' gherkins have not ruined your doublet and shirt——"

Castlehaven winced.

"Faugh! You are an ill-bred fool!" he snarled. He glared at John and then turned away. The look was fierce and vindictive, and John knew he had made a powerful and implacable enemy. The Earl quickly vanished.

John stood breathing deeply, quite aware that only his wits had saved him from serious injury, perhaps even death, for life was cheap to unscrupulous profligates such as the Earl of Castlehaven and his notorious associates. When he recovered his breath and normal composure he handed the letter to the old woman.

"From Master Vargo to ye, Mistress Sissmins," he said. "An' I will pay for the gherkins."

"From Vargo? From dear Vargo?" the crone crackled in a shrill, high-pitched voice. The expression on her sullen, lowering face changed instantly. She snatched the missive and hid it away. "'Tis good of ye, young man, and to be sure that dear Vargo must trust ye. A pie, now, for your trouble! Nay, nay! Do not refuse old Annie. There be no answer to the letter. And to think ye had it all the time. Lud! If the Earl had killed ye—but, there, he didn't. Come and see me again, sir. I like the look of ye. I like your courage, but, better still, Annie likes them blue, laughing eyes. 'Twas them as maddened m'lud more than the pickle. But away with ye now, for I cannot tarry."

To John's disgust, the old dame reached up and patted his cheek with her twisted fingers. A wave of repugnance and abhorrence swept over him, and he turned and fought his way out of the cathedral.

"I'll go see the king," he growled.

CHAPTER FOUR

On a dilapidated couch in a small, depressing garret beneath the roof of a third-story gable lay a woman whose pallor, bright, feverish, dark eyes and disordered mass of red-gold hair told a tale of suffering, of hunger, and of miserable condition. The garret itself could inspire

nothing but misery, for it was a small, dark space, dirty and festooned with horrible, funnel-like, lacy cobwebs, wherein sly, patient spiders lurked. The untrimmed rafters and the broken shingles, that here and there allowed thin spears of light to enter, were thick with them. Dust and grime covered everything. The breeze that entered the window, a hole uncovered with glass, set the strands swaying to and fro. To the restless woman on the rag-covered couch it seemed as though a thousand eyes ceaselessly watched her. She feared and loathed spiders almost as much as she now feared and hated men. But she had no refuge other than this melancholy retreat, and, if she correctly interpreted the menace of the mounting footsteps that approached nearer and nearer, she would not long have even this. For days she had eaten nothing, for a week past she had been without the means of procuring sustenance and endured the horror of the black nights and bleak days among the crawling things of the garret. But there were worse things crawling in the rooms below. She had vowed that, were she to die for it, she would sink no lower than her present level—the sunken plane to which her mad ambition and heartless selfishness had reduced her. She had mocked purity, sincerity and humility, and was now alone, forlorn and forsaken; prostrate beneath the feet that ever trampled upon her and forced her down.

Bitter and hot were the tears that stained the face of Marie Pleyel as she lay in the high, dark garret that overlooked Royal Whitehall. Memories! Down the months she had stepped as one steps down from the light of day to the cold gloom of a cellar, fighting, struggling, rebelling, but at last surrendering to the numbing hell of abandonment. To think of the past tortured her. Rienzi! Balsamo! A life taken; a love broken. Vanity, ambition, madness! To think of the future was impossible, for she could not think beyond death without crying aloud with the fear that gripped her heart. What terrible irony!

The Countess of Castlehaven! Yes; by peeping through the little window she could see the Royal palace, where the countess, some day, would curtsy before her king. What visions from a garret! What vain remorse!

In the midst of her sobbing she burst into wild, hysterical laughter and sprang from the couch in rage. How those ascending footsteps reminded her of the limping footsteps of a cripple! Ah, poor cripple! She could now understand a little of the torment that must have been his. Now it was she who was spurned, scorned and thrown carelessly aside, to live or die as best she might. Poor, kindly Guiseppe, simple lover, sincere heart. But never had she loved him, never could she love him. It was not to be. Wild, ringing laughter pealed from her lips, but she was not conscious of it. Rapidly she plaited her wonderful hair and curled it about her head in two thick ropes; the hair the cripple had kissed, the red-gold crown he had loved. The effort exhausted her and she swayed on her feet. For a time the garret spun round and round, and then the spinning ceased and her weakness seemed to vanish. The broken door shivered under a thunderous knocking.

"Come in," she called weakly. "I am here."

It was a woman who entered. Such a woman! She was fully six feet tall, and her proportions were huge. Her round, red face was heavy-featured and sullen, and the lips and chin were sprinkled with short, stiff, black hairs. In her ample, gaudy clothes, and with red, massive arms folded across a vast breast, she looked a terrifying ogress, a feminine monster of destruction. The look she directed at Marie was evil and threatening.

"The money?" She seemed to spit the words from her coarse, thick lips.

Marie shook her head.

"No money," she sighed. "No; no money."

"Out with ye, then, ye useless baggage! An' were

it not that I should be whipped I would tear the clothes from your back. Get out an' go see the king! Go see the fine ladies an' gentlemen that still crowd the balconies. Go ask the lords an' nobles, so fine in their cloth of gold, an' silver, an' diamonds. Go ask even for food of them that shout with drunken joy at the wine fountains; ask, an' be laughed to scorn by honest man an' rogue that crowd all this day the Strand an' Fleet Street to see the king go by. Ask of any that throng the Royal route. Ask, ask, for pity, for money, for food! Ye fool! There'll be none so kind as I. Yes, go ask the king. They do say he be a merry soul. Nay, all would laugh an' spit at ye for an impudent trollop! Get out with ye . . . out into the streets . . . unless, of course, ye'll be reasonable an' join an' entertain the goodly company below——"

"No, no! Too cruel, too cruel! I go out!" cried Marie desperately.

"Then go quick! Go quick, or I'll throw ye down the steps!"

Disappointment and rage blended in the woman's savage roar. She stepped forward, as though about to put her threat into execution.

"Ah, no! No, not touch me," Marie whimpered. Cowed and broken, and without a trace of her former spirit, she cringed away and crept round the woman. "Please not to touch me——"

"I've fed ye, given ye bed an' shelter; I've . . . Out, ye red-headed mule! To think of my kindness an' ye will not repay. Think ye that there be none but earls an' lords an' suchlike to please ye? I know one that would sneer at your tardy virtue, ye blabbing fool! Out, out!" shrieked the infuriated female.

In the transports of her vindictive fury, the huge woman snatched up a cracked pitcher, the only piece of crockery in the garret, and hurled it at Marie. It shattered to

pieces on the post beside her, and the shock of the impact gave strength to her weak frame, so that she rushed down the split, creaking stairs like one possessed.

Down she went, and down.

"Kindness . . . repay!" she sobbed as she ran. "Ah, the good God. Kindness . . . repay!"

Her hands were over her ears, for a far-away mocking voice seemed to echo in them. "Ah, m'dear, m'pretty dear," it said. "What title have you to sympathy? Eh, m'dear?"

Madly she broke through and away from the outstretched, grasping hands of the jovial company in the large room that was on a level with the street. She raced along the low, narrow, plastered passage. Outside she paused, reeling and panting deeply, and looked up, to see the blowsy woman leaning out over the sill of the garret-window, her great mouth and fists working furiously. Marie did not stay to listen to the storm of vituperation and invective. She turned and, half-running, half-walking, fled as fast as her failing strength would permit. Her eyes were blinded with tears, her heart almost bursting, and her limbs trembling with weakness.

She stumbled on, looking neither to left nor right. She had no destination and no thought. She just blundered on through the quizzing, impertinent crowd until her halting progress was terminated by bumping violently into a tall man dressed in brown and black. She collapsed on to the stones of the street, dimly conscious of a pair of laughing, blue eyes that twinkled with the humour of this sudden incident. But the laughter changed to seriousness when he saw that the woman who grovelled at his feet was spent and a pitiful object of weakness and despair.

"Please . . . to help," she whispered, her lips, her hands, her whole body quivering with this last effort and appeal. "Ah, help . . . or I die. . . ."

John Steele looked about him in momentary bewilder-

ment. He heard several women laugh and whisper, and he saw the grins and knowing looks on the faces of men. Then, without further hesitation, he bent and lifted the prostrate woman in his arms and strode through the crowd.

"At least, 'tis naught to laugh at," he growled at those nearest to him. "Some day some of ye might plead to be lifted out of the kennel. Pray God there be someone to lift ye!"

The stern set of his face and the contemptuous light in his blue eyes did not invite further flippancy, and those that had gathered round stepped back in silence and allowed him to pass. He gave one swift glance at the woman he carried.

"A woman of France," he thought as he went along, "an' ill at that. What, in God's name, am I to do with her? Who may she be? An' I be a judge, which I'm not, her clothes be of good stuff, though ill used. An' see the looks of merriment on all sides. In truth I must look a sad fool. What am I to do with a woman? Naught do I know of the sex save they be strange, tricky creatures. 'Tis damnable! Why, she may be a . . . but, nay! That be a base thought. What concerns ye, ye meddler, is that she be in great distress. Could I pass her by? Could any man do that? Then see to it."

Beyond Temple Bar in Fleet Street stood an apothecary's shop. The sign was a welcome sight to John's troubled eyes. The shop would afford refuge from the stares and sharp comments of those that followed. The place was yet a little distance away, and he increased his pace. He was angry with himself, with the unknown woman he carried, and with the giggling, jeering, jostling throng that encompassed him. It was a ridiculous situation. But he did not dream of abandoning the woman who had appealed to him. He was not like that, and he was determined to do what he could for her. His head was

high as he walked along. But he sighed with relief when at last he entered the shop and placed his unconscious burden on the oak couch opposite the counter.

The cheerful apothecary was a ferret-eyed, hand-rubbing, under-sized person dressed in tight-fitting black doublet and breeches. He merely increased John's responsibility. His examination of Marie was short and quick. He had seen many like her. He beamed at John over the top of his large, steel-rimmed spectacles.

"Her condition is not uncommon," he piped.

"Not—not the plague?" stammered John. When a boy he had seen a man stricken with the disease that ever lurked in the dirty, teeming streets. He did not like the red spots that burned in the woman's cheeks.

"No," said the apothecary, with a laugh at the other's trepidation. "She is starving. The woman is exhausted. That is all."

"All! Starving!" echoed John, gazing at Marie's white face and still form. "Starving, did ye say? Surely it cannot be that?"

"Yes, it is that. Feed her, and she will soon recover——"

"But—but—I do not know the woman. I found her in the street. She is a stranger——"

"Ah, but I cannot attend to her, good sir," said the man gently but very firmly. "They are mostly found in the streets. And I cannot advise you. But if she does not receive food and care for a little time, then assuredly she will die. I am very sorry, very regretful, but . . ."

The pause was significant, and John saw that for the present the woman's very life depended upon his charity.

"I thank ye," he said shortly, and paid the man.

"To bring her to her senses a stimulant is helpful. Light food and a warm bed are essential, for she has starved long and gradually. Good day, good sir."

"Good day," grunted John, swinging out of the shop with Marie again in his arms.

In the crowded street he paused and looked down at the pallid face close to his shoulder. A frown of perplexity and annoyance creased his brow.

"Whoever ye be, it be worse for ye than for me. Whether I like it or not, I've got to take ye home an' feed ye, an' care for ye," he muttered. "I would not like to think I killed ye. But as soon as ye can stand alone—out ye go! A woman . . . oh, Lord! A warm bed an' attention! My blood! This be a pretty mess!"

He groaned at his bad luck and hailed the driver of a covered market-cart that was creaking slowly along.

"For a shilling, will ye take us to Paternoster Row?" he inquired anxiously.

"Aye," drawled the man, staring owlishly at Marie. "I will that. 'Tis a hard day's pay, be a shillin', good master. Be she terrible sick?"

"No, not sick. She has swooned," John hastened to assure him.

"Oi, aye, good master. Throw 'er in wi' they cabbages, good sirr. They won't be 'urt none. I be goin' to Cheap, anyway. Up 'ere wi' me."

John did as he was directed and the vegetable cart rumbled along through the happy crowds and gaily decorated streets towards Paternoster Row, carrying a stolid driver in soil-stained smock and tattered straw hat; a worried man whose chin was on his hand and whose steeple-crowned hat was cocked to one side; and an unconscious woman clad in soiled silks and satins lying on a bed of large green cabbages. Dreams and reality; brocade and cabbages. What bitter irony; what merciless mockery.

As the cart rumbled up Ludgate Hill, John turned and looked down. A shaft of light from the setting sun struck into the vehicle and rested upon the face of the woman.

"'Tis devilish," he growled. "An' 'tis pitiful. Starved! A warm bed an' attention . . . hum! I'll speak with Vargo. He be sure to know where the services of a suitable woman can be got. Aye, Vargo will know."

"Did ye say the name 'Vargo'?" inquired the phlegmatic driver with sudden interest.

"Aye, maybe," said John absently.

"He o' the pierced tongue—be it he, sirr, ye mean?"

"Yes, yes," replied John testily.

"Then take care, good master. Oi, aye, sirr! There be a man I know would pierce 'is turrible 'eart an' 'e could do it. A bad 'un be that Vargo——"

"Oh, 'tis absurd!" John snarled. "Ye must be thinking of another."

"Nay, sirr; 'tis the same," the wagoner replied gloomily. "I've heered volks say 'e do vly by night, do Vargo."

"Faugh!" snorted the disbelieving John. However, it was comforting to think he was not the only imbecile on the cart.

"Oi, aye, sirr! I think ye be a fule," was the driver's unexpected retort.

"A fool, ye say?" gasped the astonished John.

"Aye, an' I'll tell ye why, sirr. Ye woan't listen to truth, an' ye let your woman lie there like a dead 'un, a stiff dead 'un. Why doan't ye bring 'er to sense, sirr? 'Tis easy. Ye but 'old up 'er laigs an' rub 'un. I believe ye're scairt. She be your woman, but ye be a turrible fule, sirr, an' it do all look queer to I."

"No more from ye," said John haughtily. His demeanour was icy, but his face was hot and flushed. "When I want advice I—I'll ask for it."

The wagoner spat over the side of the cart. His contempt for the confused man beside him could not be expressed in mere words.

When the cart stopped in front of his shop John was very glad to pay the man his promised shilling and dismiss

him. But his services if not his advice were worth the coin. Across the street Vargo was busy carrying his birds within doors for the night. John hailed him:

"Master Vargo! An' ye will favour me, step across."

Vargo hesitated. Then he came, walking slowly. He paused by John's side.

"Why, Master Steele!" he exclaimed in his queer voice. "What be this——"

"A woman," said John unnecessarily. "I found her in a street hard by Charing Cross. She be in need of food an' care."

Vargo bent his tall form and stared at Marie. His black eyes narrowed to slits and his lips became set. Then he slowly straightened and smiled.

"Ye be very considerate, Master Steele," he said. "But tell Vargo how ye met *that* woman."

John quite missed the significant manner in which the sibilant words were spoken, and failed to notice the strange glare that lighted the old man's eyes as he stared at Marie.

"It matters not! I merely found her in this pitiable condition. Harken to me, good Vargo! Ye know good folk. Can ye send me a woman to care for this sufferer?"

"I don't——"

"Ye must!" John interrupted with emphasis. "Ye can readily see I can do naught for her. I promised to help the woman, but I cannot—I—that be to say—oh, but ye must know someone."

"Ye will not send her to the parish?"

"That I will not," said John gruffly. "I will do this thing myself. The parish! They'd kill the poor creature. The parish! God forbid! 'Twould be the end of her."

"Kill the wench . . . yes, yes, Master Steele. I see what ye mean. There be a plague of paupers in the city. Vargo will see what he can do. Ye are a thoughtful, kindly man, ye be, and Vargo will help ye. A woman, now. A nurse woman. Of course, Vargo knows of a

woman. Just the one, Master Steele. A kind, gentle, loving creature is she—humph! Yes, she be! I'll send her to ye."

When Vargo finished hissing and spluttering, John thanked him. The old man walked back to his shop deep in thought. This thing was amazing. The very letter this man had carried to Annie Sissmins concerned this very woman. The promised money could still be grasped. Vargo was so engrossed that when he left his shop he forgot the remainder of the birds on the pavement.

"A kindly woman," he muttered as he strode along. "Yes, yes, to be sure I know of one. Vargo, ye can smell money in this thing. Ye can return good for evil —huh! hs-s-s s-s! Ho, ho! hs-s-s-s! Does not the blessed Psalmist say: 'Give them according to their deeds, and according to the wickedness of their endeavours: give them after the work of their hand; render to them their desert'? Huh! Huh! hs-s-s-s-s! But stay! Give thought to this thing. Annie spoke of a cripple who has more gold than my lord has pence. Ho! ho! Be careful, Vargo! Gold, my Vargo! The cripple is rich, says Annie. Vargo, be prudent in this matter. Think of the gold, Vargo. The cripple, eh? Huh! huh! hs-s-s-s-s!"

Vargo hurried on.

John unlocked the door of his shop and hurriedly entered. He passed through the tiny living-room, ascended the stairs, and then kicked open the door of his room. With a sigh of relief he placed Marie on the bed. For a moment he stood undecided as to his next course of action. Then, after arranging the pillows under her head and removing her shoes, he raced downstairs to where a small sideboard stood under the slanting staircase.

From a drawer he took a spoon and a bottle of dark French brandy. He regarded the cognac and the spoon dubiously.

" 'Twould be better, maybe, if I put the bottle to her

lips. I doubt not she'll need a considerable sup," he said to himself.

This he did with complete success. The fiery cognac nearly choked Marie, and set her coughing and gasping. He retreated in dismay when her eyes opened and rested upon him. He stood with the bottle in one hand and the spoon in the other, looking like one on the point of flight.

"Thank . . . I thank," Marie whispered. "Oh, so kind, so kind."

"'Tis naught, 'tis naught," John mumbled hurriedly. "Are ye better? Could yet eat a pie——"

"Eat . . . ?" Marie struggled to rise. Her voice was eager and shrill.

John rushed to her in alarm and gently forced her back on the bed. He did not like the wild, ravenous look in her dark eyes.

"Well, ye cannot have it," he said sternly. "But lie still there, an' I'll get ye something else. Ye be very weak an' must be fed like a sick child. Nay, nay! Ye've shed enough tears. Still . . . I don't know . . . maybe 'twill ease ye to blubber. 'Tis a womanish habit, I'm told. Rest quiet whilst I prepare a posset for ye. 'Twill do to start on, maybe."

Marie said something in reply, but John could not catch the words. But the sigh that escaped her lips needed no words to explain its meaning: it was a faint echo of the heart's content, a song without melody, yet sweet and rich in thanksgiving.

"I—I be getting a woman to attend ye," John said hastily, and then left the room.

She did not reply, but lay quiet and still. Her eyes followed him.

"He is diff'rent, this one," she murmured in her broken, difficult English. "So diff'rent. Not think evil. Ah, no! How good is this, this bed, this clean man's room —how good!"

CHAPTER FIVE

For the first time in his life John did not give his whole attention to business. His first waking thought when rising from the makeshift bed in the living-room at the rear of the shop was of the woman above him. His last thoughts at night were of her. There were two women in his room, but, as far as he was concerned, the nurse with the inscrutable eyes and the grim mouth might not have existed. He was grateful enough, and polite enough to this tall, silent woman whom Vargo had sent to him, and he saw that she had what she required. But beyond that, his interest in her was completely overshadowed by his interest in the patient with the wonderful hair and the still more marvellous eyes, eyes that during the first few days would hold him with the challenge, the fear, the wonder in them, and then would suddenly droop and become wistful, introspective. At times he had stood by the bedside, looking down at her with frank curiosity, and she, to avoid his direct glance and pleasant smile, would turn from him. When in this mood he felt uncomfortable and ill-at-ease, for she ignored him completely. Then he would leave her to her thoughts and the care of the grim nurse.

He had pondered over this strange aloofness, but, as yet, he had not received enlightenment. He had not asked questions, although the mystery of her situation, her nationality, and her exotic beauty urged him to do so. Now, however, the time had come when questions must be asked and decisions made. A week had passed since she entered his house, and she was rapidly gaining health and strength. Besides, he could no longer afford to pay the nurse.

The woman's curt advice when he paid her astonished

him. So did the look she gave him from the hard, grey eyes that were shaded by her hood.

"Watch her, Master Steele," she said, her voice cold and incisive. "Guard her closely and do not let her go forth to wander and starve again. For a time none but you can protect her."

None but he?

"But I cannot keep a woman here," he protested. "She must go. 'Twon't do, mistress. A woman here . . . an' me. 'Tis impossible, ye can see!"

"Master Steele, she must not go! Go up to her. You will find her dressed and seated by the window. 'Tis fortunate she is to be alive."

And with that last cryptic remark the woman turned abruptly on her heel and left him to stare after her. Her words kept ringing in his mind. None but he? Why none but he?

"But this be—this be—humph!" he breathed softly to himself.

At the foot of the stairs he made one step and then paused. He turned away, angry with himself and with the nurse. Why had she spoken like that? Why had she so stressed the words she uttered? What impudence to practically command him, to regulate his conduct, and to formulate his decisions. Impudence! As if the young woman could stay here! He would soon know about it from the neighbours. Indeed, he would! The neighbours! After all, who were they to interfere? No; he did not care two straws for them, but he did care about sharing his house with a female. The place would not be like home with a woman poking about and upsetting this and that—pshaw! The whole business was absurd and impossible. He did not wish to be cruel, but the woman above must go. Decidedly she could not remain under his roof another night. She was a sensible woman. He would tell her plainly. That was always the best way

to prosecute unpleasant duties. Still, perhaps tact and suggestion—ah! What a comforting thought. Yes; it had better be done at once.

He mounted gingerly to the top of the stairs. She was singing. He bent forward to listen. How sweet was her voice, how pretty the song. He did not understand the words of the song, but the manner in which the lilting melody was sung brought a smile to his lips and a gleam to his eyes. He did not know she could sing like that. The song ceased and he knocked gently on the door. There was no reply, but he heard a chair move. He knocked again.

"The door—it is not lock," he was informed. He liked the quaint, foreign way she spoke her simple English.

He entered the room and then stood very still. Impulsively he spoke aloud the thought that was dominant in his mind.

"You be very beautiful," he said. "An' I don't e'en know your name." And then, as though suddenly aware of her regard, and that his blunt, clumsy compliment might be thought rude and offensive, his manner became awkward and maladroit.

She stood brushing her hair by the window, and the long tresses shone in the sunlight. She threw part of it over her shoulder when he spoke and into her dark eyes there crept an alert look.

"Ah, yes," she said slowly. "I know."

John thought she spoke bitterly, but perhaps it was just the effect of her peculiar accent.

"I heard you sing . . ." he said, for want of something better to say.

"My mother, long ago—ah, so long ago—sing it to me. I forget my mother—but I no forget the song. I —life was diff'rent. . . ."

John did not speak, and after a little while Marie again spoke to him.

"My name—it is Marie," she vouchsafed, and began to plait her hair. "The woman? She is gone?"

"Yes," said John, "she be. Marie . . . ? 'Tis a pretty name, an' I may say it?"

She nodded and directed a quick, sidelong glance at him. How simple he was, how transparent, a man without a guile.

"Then I go, too," she sighed. "So kind are you. My life to you I owe . . . so kind."

A pretty trick she had of glancing up from under the dark screen of her lashes.

"Go? Who said anything about going?" demanded John gruffly. Then he frowned at his foolish, feeble chivalry.

"You are good. I not know your name. It is—it is——"

"It be John Steele," he replied, more gruffly than before.

"John . . . ?"

"Yes; John Steele."

"I call you John?" she said, showing a glimpse of white teeth as she smiled slightly. "I like John. You not want me to go?"

"I—well, I—I do not! Stay until your own be found, or till they find you. I don't mind," he hastily replied. He was furious with himself. This was not at all what he wanted to say.

"You want me to—to not go? Why?"

Marie turned and faced him. He was conscious of a subtle change in her manner and voice.

"Because I want you to," he mumbled. It was not easy to explain why he wanted her to remain when he did not.

"Ah!" she snapped fiercely, her eyes glowing, her voice cold. "Marie know! I go now!"

John's eyes blazed.

"Ye'll not—ye conceited woman!" he stormed suddenly, aroused by her words and manner. "'Tis unfair for ye to say that! 'Tis unjust to me——"

Marie astonished him by laughing with genuine amusement.

"Oh, yes, John," she said softly, "Marie think that, too. But she want to be sure." She pointed to the bed. "Please to sit down. Marie ver' sorry. Not want to hurt John."

"'Twould be better, maybe, if ye went," grumbled John, his anger swiftly fading. He was ashamed that he had spoken so heatedly.

"Ah, no, John," she faltered, her manner pleading and submissive. "Please to keep me. I work—I help—oh! How I work for you, John."

"Humph! Maybe we'd better talk over this matter. 'Tis most confoundedly serious," he muttered.

"No, no! No talk! Marie stay with John——"

"No!"

He shook his head with an air of finality and then sat down on the bed.

"No . . . ?" Marie was surprised. She came and sat beside him. "But just now you say—yes. You say—conceited woman, stop! Ah, John, Marie have no—no place——"

"Ye mean ye have no home?" he asked quickly.

"No—yes."

"No people?"

"Peeble? Peeble . . . ? I not know peeble——"

John laughed in spite of himself.

"Relations, then? Your mother, your father, your . . . husband. Are ye married?"

"Married?" she echoed harshly. Her tone jarred upon his ears. He looked at her in astonishment when she rose and walked to the window. For a little while she would not face him.

"Have I offended ye?" he asked contritely.

"Ah, no."

"Well, then, are ye?" he insisted.

"No," was the curt reply. "I not marry. I never . . . do that."

"Humph! Well, maybe not. 'Tis uncertain, I agree. But for why did ye turn away from me?"

She seemed about to reply, but came again to his side instead. John remained silent until she spoke.

"Marie is ver' lonely, John—a ver' lonely, lost woman——"

"'Tis a shame on me to start ye weeping. 'Tis a shame for such pretty eyes—for ye to be so distressed. Faugh! I be disgusted at myself—a thorough blockhead an' no hand with a woman. But I vow I meant well towards ye——"

"My name, it is Marie," she encouraged him, softly.

"I did not mean to be cruel to ye, Mistress Marie," he finished somewhat lamely.

"Cruel? You, John? No, no! You are so kind, not cruel, never cruel. I stay . . . ?"

John breathed heavily.

"I suppose ye'd better—for a while—till I find trace of your people——"

"Oh! But so good!" she cried happily. Then quick consternation showed in her voice and expression. "John . . . but your good wife? Mad, angry, she might be——"

"Wife? Pshaw! Mistress Marie—you're crazy!" he said, laughing loudly and turning red.

"No wife?" she insisted, watching him closely.

"My blood! No!" was the emphatic reply.

"Then you ver' lonely, too?" she inquired naïvely.

He was not insensible of the ingenuous manner, the artlessness of this strange, beautiful woman, but he found that he was not displeased.

"I've told ye before I've no way with a woman. I cannot face or talk with the sex. But ye seem to be different,

Mistress Marie. It is strange, but I be at ease with ye. Come downstairs an' sit in the kitchen—'tis that an' living-room an' everything else combined. But 'tis a cosy room, an' we'll brew some tea—'tis a luxury, but for this once—an', an' can ye cook?"

Marie did not trust herself to speak. She nodded. But she must have the protection of this simple, smiling man. He stood between her and those dark, pursuing forms, with their grasping hands and hot, foul lips. Here, in this humble house, was sanity, and sanctuary, and even hope.

"But are ye strong enough to descend?" he asked.

She glanced at him inquiringly.

"Can ye walk down the stairs?"

"I try. You . . . will help me?" she murmured.

"I—shall I carry ye down——?"

"No, no!" she said quickly. "I walk. I ver' strong woman."

"I'm not so sure," he muttered, gazing at her with a critical eye. "But ye can try it. Come down, then. If ye're to stay—a little while only, mind ye—ye'd better know where things be."

"John . . . it is like heaven, this quiet house. And you, you are like God . . ." she whispered.

He was shocked into immobility by such blasphemy.

"Mistress Marie! 'Tis wicked to say that! 'Tis awful!" he said sharply. "'Tis time ye did some work, else will your mind crack under such fancies. What a strange, queer woman ye be. But ye're still weak an' sick. I doubt not that be it, for the nurse-woman said ye were fortunate to be alive. A knowing woman, that."

Very diffidently he placed her arm through his when they came to the top of the stairs. Very carefully he assisted her to descend. She was trembling when the last stair was passed, and she sank into old Nathaniel's deep, high-backed chair with a grateful sigh. John lowered the huge,

blackened, iron kettle into the flames. While adjusting the long chain he said:

"It be very strange, Mistress Marie, but it seems I've known ye a long time, an' yet 'tis but a week since I found ye at Charing. D'ye know . . . ye've got the most fascinating eyes I've ever seen in a woman? Well, ye have, in all truth. But this is surely foolish lovers' talk, an' I don't love ye—that is, I don't . . . I do wish ye wouldn't look at me like that!" he finished in confusion.

She did not laugh at him. But her voice was low and vibrant when she replied:

"I not help it, John. I just look . . . like that, John."

"Aye, that be just it," he muttered. Then he said: "Ye have never told me about yourself. I found ye running like one crazed—or pursued. Why was that, Mistress Marie? Why did ye run like that? How came ye to speak English? Who taught ye that?"

For a little space she was silent. Her breath came quickly, for she dreaded the questions. How could she reply? What could she say that would preserve her and yet convince this kind man? She dare not tell him the truth. She thought swiftly.

"Ah, John," she said at last. "It is ter-ble. I not remember about it—not one thing but you. You look down at Marie—she look up and say, 'Please to help'."

"'Tis devilish queer to me," said he, looking at her in wonder.

"Yes," she replied softly. "I ver' ill."

"But ye were running away from something. How came ye to be in London? You're a foreign woman—'twas a crazy lingo ye babbled a while back—an' ye must have crossed the water. Can ye not remember anything?"

She shuddered. Then she sighed.

"Ah, no. A black nothing it is. But you tell me——"

"I trust ye're watching closely what I do an' whence

I get things?" he interrupted, drawing her attention to the wide hearth and the sideboard.

"I watch," she assured him. "You tell Marie how you find her—yes?"

"'Twas most simple," he replied, slicing thick rounds off the yard-long roll of bread. "I'd been to see the king. A wonderful day it was. Did ye see him?"

"No."

"Humph! Well, that day, for me, was naught but a series of strange adventures. 'Twas amazing. I began by having my breakfast spoiled by a foreign cripple in Angelo's ale-house—not the ordinary ale-house, 'tis different. He was from Genoa, if I rightly remember . . . what now? In God's name be ye ill again? Was it too much for ye to come down? Ye look ghastly all at once."

"No . . . John! My head it is . . . oh, it is . . ." she quavered. Her thoughts terrified her. Balsamo in London. He was seeking her. How dreadful would be his vengeance.

"Dizzy, be it?" John's voice was sympathetic.

"Yes—it is dissy. But it will go 'way," she gasped.

"Mistress Marie, ye look like ye're scared out of your wits. Don't stare so wildly. There be naught——"

"It is nothing!" she cried a little hysterically. "You tell me more."

"Ye look a bit feverish to me——"

"No, foolish man! Tell me, tell me, John," she pleaded.

"Well, then: the cripple asked me had I seen a woman. He be searching for one, but he took a dislike to me before he told what she was like to look at. Then Master Vargo —the lean old fellow across the street—gave me a letter to carry to an old dame in Paul's Walk—can ye follow me? D'ye understand what I say? Right, then. Whilst there I nearly had my ribs split with steel. A haughty dog—Castlehaven be his name——"

"Castlehaven—" Marie caught her breath quickly and fell back in the chair. She stared before her with blazing eyes.

"Can it be ye know him?" John was amazed.

"Ah, no, no, no! I but say the name. How could Marie know?" she denied swiftly and vehemently.

"Of course ye couldn't. He be an Earl. 'Tis impossible for ye to know him. Well, 'twas he. We had a difference, an' I liked not the look he gave me at its conclusion. Then I pushed through the crowd till I got down past the cross in Charing. 'Twas as far as I could go, so dense was the crowd lining the Royal route. For hours I stood waitin' and watching for the king. But he was late, having been delayed by the army, and by the Lord Mayor and Aldermen of London at Blackheath. There, 'twas said, the king was feasted in a great marquee, an' that the road, e'en from Rochester to the City, was like a great fair with booths, an' stalls, an' tents, an' gay colours, an' people dancing an' singing an' drinking. Aye, but how the crowd in the City howled an' cheered for joy; how both men an' women wept an' blessed God; an' how His Majesty did graciously smile an' doff his plumed hat in response to the thunderous salutations of the throng. 'Twas a strange, marvellous sight, though: the son cheered madly by the very people—well, there'd be many of them there—that severed his father's head from his shoulders. God alone knows what were Charles's thoughts as he rode down Whitehall, for 'twas in front of the Banqueting Hall there that his Royal sire suffered an' died so bravely an' like a true gentleman. But the Stuarts be strange, stubborn men. It remains to be seen what like is the new king, for, methinks, he be a Stuart of Stuarts. Come, now. Are ye not hungry, Mistress Marie?"

"No, John, I not hungry," she replied slowly. "I ver' interested to listen."

"But, Mistress Marie, ye must eat. Look before ye!

There be honey, an' cold beef, an' rich, tasty fat from the roasted meat. I'll toast ye some bread, an' it please ye. Will it not tempt ye?" John looked disappointed. "Ye can use my knife and fork till I get another. . . . Oh, Lord! She be weeping again! Now, what be the bother this time?"

"Oh, John—Marie plead, she pray not let her go!" she cried brokenly, gratitude and fear and horror all possessing her mind. "See . . . John! On her knees Marie plead——"

"Get ye up, girl! Up, I say, for ye must not kneel to me or any man!" he protested hastily. In a stride he was beside her, and then he gently lifted her back on to the chair. "Ye must command yourself, Mistress Marie. There be naught to fear—for ye do fear, I plainly see—as I would not send ye forth unprotected an' to perish. Here shall ye stay till your own claim ye. More I cannot do, an', e'en so, I chance a whipping at the cart's tail—but that troubles me little, though 'tis not pleasant."

"A whipping . . . ?" Marie was startled.

"We be not married—be we?"

"You ver' good to me, John. Ver' kind to a lost stranger woman," she whispered. The low tone was charged with sincerity.

"Pshaw!" snorted John. He looked and felt uneasy and embarrassed. " 'Tis naught. Will ye eat now?"

"Yes," she said.

CHAPTER SIX

UPON the high poop of the merchant's ship, about the hour of nine on the last night of July, Balsamo and Panizzi stood talking.

"Castlehaven," said Balsamo, "will be greatly astonished to see us. That grim night, far away back in the sad months, now seems a part of another life. I have good news. Girolamo, that for which I have so patiently waited and planned has been granted. I am commanded to Whitehall. The English king has at last consented to an audience with the wealthy foreign cripple. So great is the power of my wealth that it has purchased for me a private conversation with this amiable monarch, this Charles, who already demands more and more money to satisfy the insatiable demands of his concubines and favourites. If he will lend a favourable ear to my plea, my plan, then money shall he have for a time in abundance. I cannot fight Castlehaven with steel, but I can repay his treachery with gold, and in a manner not to his liking."

"But, Guiseppe, you cannot thus buy a king," Panizzi demurred.

"Nay, Girolamo; but I can buy others to whom the king eagerly listens. He has little or no mind of his own when under the spell of beauty. For money and for a beautiful woman I verily believe he would sell his kingdom. Have you no conception of how these things are done? It is so simple, provided the purse is deep enough and the tongue wise and still. And all at the English Court are not friends of the Earl."

"You would bait the king with a woman? You, Guiseppe?" Panizzi was astounded.

Balsamo laughed.

"Was I not baited with a woman?" he retorted.

"You do not expect to find Marie there, surely, Guiseppe?"

"Marie . . . my poor Marie! I fear she is dead, so utterly vanished is all trace of her. Not even that whispering creature named Vargo can discover her. Nay, even were she still alive, she would not be at Whitehall. There is one there who would see to that. But he will not go unscathed. Mascagni, the lesser rascal, I doubt not still remembers his punishment. But my plans for the Earl are very different. You well know that. His life is forfeit, according to the laws of God and man."

Panizzi invariably maintained a discreet silence whenever Mascagni's name chanced to be mentioned. So did Sala.

"Shall you go alone, Guiseppe?"

"You and the Nubian—if he can be persuaded to leave his love—will accompany me. I alone, of course, shall speak with the king. But I am now so enfeebled that I dare not trust myself to venture forth without you. I owe you much, Girolamo. You have been both patient with a vengeful man and faithful to a friend. It is not forgotten. At the hour of eleven a mask ball is to be held at Whitehall. At midnight I will talk with Charles."

"Do you expect Castlehaven to be there?"

"No; for this night he is to be married——"

"Married?" Panizzi was startled. "Castlehaven to be married?"

"I shall be present at the ceremony. I doubt not he will be very much astonished. Vargo keeps me well informed."

"Yet he cannot find Marie?"

"Alas, no. But he says he is confident that before long he will have word of her. An enigma is he, and, like myself, he has suffered. But to continue: the Earl is marrying contrary to the king's wishes. The woman is of good, but not noble, birth, and is wealthy. Therein lies the reason for his lordship's devotion. He realizes that he

must have both money and his sovereign's goodwill, and, in his usual crafty manner, has arranged for the marriage to be secret. But that shall not be. His losses at cards and dice have been so great that even the Jews have closed their purses. But another reason may account for that. It amused him to slit the nose of a certain usurer who refused to advance against a worthless estate and a still more worthless word. His action might have influenced the money-lending fraternity. But I intend witnessing this marriage before proceeding to the palace. It will be an item of interest to the king."

"Then you were aware of this for some time past?"

"Yes, and I have prepared accordingly. We leave the ship within the hour. Acquaint Sala and prize him away from that restless mistress of his. Such a roaring and snarling down there that I marvel the Nubian remains constant."

"I know not which is the greater savage," said Panizzi with a laugh.

"Another shall determine that for us ere long. Now for to-night. Five men will accompany us. See that all are armed, for, apart from the Earl and his blood-letting friends, there are murderous bands raking the black streets wherein the leaning gables nod and whisper to each other."

Panizzi descended the steps that led from the poop. His reply came floating up:

"I will see to it, Guiseppe. Is he to be married in a church?"

"He is too clever for that. He is taking the woman to the house of Vargo the whisperer. After the marriage they will go to Oxford, where the Earl expects to spend the woman's money and make secret love to her at the same time. A clever one is he. But his time will come."

"Guiseppe, why do you wait? Why not kill this dog and let us begone?" Panizzi asked. "Why allow him to break another heart and ruin another life?"

"She desires him purely for the social advancement he can offer her. He wants her money. Both are selfish and determined. Then there is Marie. Have you forgotten that my love means more to me than my hate? I fear I am not like the Roman of old. When I find her then will I strike. You know what awaits him."

"I am impatient to see it," Panizzi replied. "I crave to watch the final exhibition of his lordship's swordsmanship. Ah, what a sight it will be!"

Alone upon the poop, Balsamo paced to and fro. Above, in the cloudless vault of the heavens, a round white moon shone through the intricate pattern of masts, sloping spars, hanging ropes and taut rigging. The brilliant orb was not yet at the zenith. The merchant's shadow kept pace and lay towards the west. The ship was dappled with moon shadows, and dim forms moved through them here and there. From the high forecastle came laughter and song and swelling sounds of revelry, and from below, seemingly from far below, came other strange sounds from a savage throat.

Balsamo was dressed in his customary manner, and he looked a bent, grotesque figure as he limped tirelessly across the poop. The heavy, silver ferrule of his ebony stick tapped the planks as he walked.

The ship was still and the night was hushed. Sound, when it occurred, was local and distinct. There was no wind to carry the wild, riotous night-life that was rapidly becoming fashionable in the City. The curving, winding river was placid, like a gleaming lake, like a smooth ribbon of light, except when the prows and oars of wherries and other craft cut through it and sent rolling ripples to left and right.

Time passes swiftly in meditation. The merchant's eyes saw not the beauty of the night. To him London Bridge, with its fantastic houses, its barbarous relics of civilized justice, its strolling lovers, and its laughter and tears, was

merely a blurred shadow in the distance. The grim Tower across the stream, peopled with living memories of a long past, of a glorious past, and of a red, cruel past, was a dark pile of no interest. The innumerable slender Gothic spires of the City that pointed heavenward, like the tapering fingers of hidden, pious hands, were merely irregularities in the dark skyline. The ships and smaller vessels, carriers of commerce, of romance and of tragedy, were merely shapes that moved or were still. Panizzi's voice roused him.

"All is in readiness, Guiseppe."

Sala joined them on the deck. The Nubian was as majestic and barbaric as ever, in head and loin-cloths of red and purple silk. He carried the merchant down the quivering ladder and placed him on the cushions under the canopy that covered the stern of the boat. Then he bent forward and sat on the prow, for he liked to watch the water coming towards him.

"To Blackfriars Stairs, Girolamo," said Balsamo. "As it is between tides, we can safely pass under the bridge without fear of danger or a wetting. There is one I would speak with before proceeding to Vargo's house——"

"A woman, Guiseppe?" inquired the inquisitive Panizzi.

"Yes."

"A beautiful woman, Guiseppe?"

"Yes."

"By the Mass, I cannot understand you at times, Guiseppe."

"Do not try—at times, my friend. The river is busy to-night."

The boat shot away from the ship's side and pulled towards London Bridge.

"It is a warm, still night for this windy, misty, rain-drenched City," replied Panizzi. "The people are enjoying the river and the moonlight. The moon has lighted the City so that it resembles a city of dreams. It has turned the river into a broad highway whereon happiness and love

glide swiftly, and gently, and slowly, to and fro. A night for lovers, Guiseppe."

"Yes . . . a night for lovers," Balsamo repeated, and Panizzi cursed his thoughtlessness. The merchant's silence proved that the words had aroused memories that were better left dormant. Panizzi knew every mood of the other man, and was also content to remain silent.

They passed many vessels before they came to the stirlings, the huge, barge-shaped foundations that rose above the water and supported the massive stone piers and arches of London Bridge. The wooden, picturesque, gabled houses that stretched the length of the bridge, all of them rising to three stories or thereabouts, showed lights here and there at the windows that overlooked the flowing river. The moonlight was not bright enough to reveal the fresh and dried heads of malefactors, impaled on long, upright spikes, to be seen above Traitors' Gate on the southern end of the bridge. Beneath the quaint old Elizabethan houses that overhung the river on both sides, wherries and barges pulled up and down, as though beneath the walls and windows of a new Venice, and music and laughter echoed over the bright water.

The gap under the drawbridge of Nonesuch House was fortunately clear of craft, and they passed slowly beneath the railed stretch of road above them. But the boat did not go far beyond the bridge. Leaning against the iron rails beside the drawbridge were a man and a woman, enjoying the fragrant air and the silver scene below them. The woman laughed. Clearly her words came to the ears of those in the boat.

"Ah, John!" she cried ecstatically. "It is like the land of fairies. See the—the pretty boat? Is it not ver', ver' beaut'ful?"

Balsamo slowly moved. His head went up and his dark eyes widened.

"Heard you that voice, Girolamo?" he asked. "Heard

you that woman's voice? Surely it is she——"

The woman pointed down at the boat.

"It is like a gondola," she said.

The merchant checked the rowers and peered up between the silk curtains at the two forms outlined against the moon. The man's reply was too low to be heard.

"Girolamo!" gasped Balsamo, grasping the other's arm.

Again the woman spoke, and then she lifted up her voice in song. Clearly over the water rang the sweet notes and words of a Genoese gondola song. Those in the boat listened. They did not move, for this song of their land held them entranced. The melody died away.

"Girolamo! It is she!" cried the merchant wildly. "It is Marie! That song . . . that voice! She is alive . . . my beloved! Marie! Marie!" He turned and shouted at the rowers like one in a frenzy. "Turn about! Turn about!" he commanded shrilly.

Panizzi was looking up. At the merchant's cry he saw the woman recoil and clutch at her companion as though in mortal fear. He saw the tall man bend and listen to her swift words. Then, without another glance at the boat, they turned and walked rapidly away.

"Marie . . . Marie!" screamed Balsamo, endeavouring to steady himself on his feet. He waved, he beckoned, he shouted, he screamed after them again. "Do not go! It is I, Guiseppe! Marie . . . Marie! Ah, do not go. . . ."

But no reply came to his ears.

"Follow them—follow them!" panted the distracted man. "It is my love! Follow . . . Christ! Do not let her vanish again. Sala! Be after them—you black hound! Trace them, or I'll—go, go, laggard! Ah, Marie . . ."

The Nubian's reply was the splash he made as he dived beneath the surface of the river. He swam into the shadows of the bridge, and vanished.

Balsamo turned frantically to Panizzi. For the moment the shock had robbed him of all control. It set his features

quivering and his limbs shaking. His eyes were wet with tears. He could barely speak, so great and deep was his emotion.

"Girolamo," he whispered harshly, "you saw! Was it not she?"

Panizzi nodded.

"Yes, Guiseppe; it was she. The woman was Marie."

"She is not dead! She is alive and happy—thanks be to God! She sang, Girolamo; she sang!"

"Yes, she sang. She does not seem unhappy, Guiseppe. Nor does she lack company, it seems."

"That is cruel, Girolamo! And from you! You are cruel!" cried the merchant bitterly. He fell back against the soft cushions.

"I but saw what you saw, Guiseppe," was the quiet reply. "And was she not singing for another? See! There is that great black cat Sala already on the bridge. Ah, he, too, has gone. Have no fear, Guiseppe. You shall soon learn all."

"In fairness I admit you speak the truth," Balsamo muttered. "But I care not! She is mine! And I shall, I will have her! Lips, and body, and soul, she is mine! I swear it by the cross of Christ! I can endure no more. Shall I have endured all this mutilation and agony, this patience that is worse than all, for nothing? Ah, this craving . . . this love . . . is madness!"

Again the intensity of his emotion mastered him. His voice rose to a shriek. He writhed and twisted his maimed, broken body spasmodically. His wide eyes flashed with a strange light, so strange that Panizzi moved uneasily. Deep down in his heart he regarded the finding of Marie as a calamity. Far better were she dead, this woman who cast her unbreakable spell upon saint and sinner alike, this beautiful creature of the red-gold hair who was as cruel and alluring as Circe herself. He removed his hat and rubbed hard at his bald head. He felt that he must say something.

"Yes, Guiseppe; she shall," he said convincingly. "In truth she shall."

"To the stairs—to the stairs! Land me there——"

"But what of Castlehaven—the King—the other woman?"

"The stairs, I say! I have found her—found her. Ah, God is good!"

The heavy oars bent like canes under the startled grip of the iron-fisted men.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JOHN laughed as he followed the agitated Marie. While the abrupt ending to a pleasant outing was a matter for conjecture and wonderment, it was also amusing to be beseeched, implored, pulled, scolded, dragged, and entreated to hurry, as though he were a child in charge of a pretty, impetuous nursemaid. He already knew that Mistress Marie could be very imperious, distant, and haughty, and then the next moment submissive, demure, and desirable. He had ceased trying to understand her, or even trying to understand himself, for he realized that her capriciousness, her sincerity, her beauty, her appeal, her many-changing moods, played upon his heart like skilled fingers on the strings of a harp. He knew that he loved her, and that she watched him with that keen, intuitive perception that keeps women eternally on the alert, and would vanish upstairs at the first sign of his love. She evaded his eyes, his words, or his advances by a great bustle and flurry at her work, or would, when no other avenue of escape presented itself, freeze him with cold, distant, distrustful glances. She would not even look at other men, and passed them by as though they did not exist, ignoring and

manifestly resenting the frank looks of admiration that were directed at her. She perplexed and bewildered him; she amused and fascinated him; she drew him and held him, yet she would not permit him to approach her in any manner other than that of friend and benefactor. Always did she shelter behind that intangible barrier of reserve and disapproval whenever he made the first step over the border-line of mere friendship. At times she was frank with him, and then how delightful she was; but there were moments when she was quiet and thoughtful, and her averted eyes held something in their depths that was either pain or shame. No; he did not understand her, but were she to give him the slightest encouragement he would tell her of his love.

To Marie the life of the past weeks was like a clean, sweet breath inhaled in a garden of unimagined beauty and tranquillity. Its perfume lingered in head, in heart, and in soul. The fragrance of this new existence was so precious that to think of the past nauseated her; to think that John Steele might glimpse that dark period tortured her. "It is like heaven," she had said. "And you are like God." How shocked he had been, how stern and reproving. But to her it was just like that: a tiny corner of heaven wherein she was at peace. To her complex nature life's bitter experience was more enlightening and enduring than any words of wisdom, advice, or prayer. She was too ashamed to pray. She had not forgotten, and so she gave to John Steele no encouragement beyond that of proximity and inherent charm. These two she could not help, for the former was her salvation, and the latter was intrinsic. She was not insensible of his love, and she, too, wondered what waited behind the mists of the future. Such a precious gift as the love of this humble, steadfast young Englishman was greater and sweeter to her than the gift of sparkling wine, cool and plentiful, would be, were she alone in a parched land. It made her joyful and

exultant; it plunged her, crushed and aching with regret, into the black abyss of utter hopelessness. One moment she was on the point of giving way to this love: the next moment she had withdrawn behind an icy wall of reserve from where she repelled his shy advances. She dared not tell him, for that would kill his love. She dared not leave him.

Imagine, then, the turmoil and the terror of her mind when she recognized the voice of Guiseppe Balsamo, the man she had scorned and so cruelly humiliated, the man who had crossed the seas for vengeance. And John laughed at her haste, laughed and teased, and did not understand her sudden fear. Oh, but he was obstinate! He would not hurry. He held back and laughed.

"John—John!" she panted, dragging at his arm. "Be quick! Oh, I—I so ill—so ver' ill again. Ah, now, please to run!"

"But, Marie, how can ye run if ye're so ill?" he retorted, laughing at her frantic efforts to pull him along. "Tarry a while. Look at the bright moon. See how it smiles down upon us. 'Tis fresh outdoors, an' truly ye be most beautiful this night——"

"Stubborn man!" she suddenly scolded. "I run on; I go leave you; I fall down; I die——"

"Not ye," he scoffed. "'Tis a funny girl ye be. One moment ye're singing with the ease and sweetness of a nightingale, an' the next, because some loon in a boat jumps up an' frightens ye, ye tear away like a mad woman."

She glanced behind her fearfully. They had not yet stepped from the bridge. Then, in desperation, she whispered softly to him:

"Please to run, John, for me, for Marie. Do this, an' she will, she will . . ."

"She will not! Ye've caught me that way before, ye minx!"

"Yes, John—Marie promise—she swear it. Run quick with me an' one kiss ye get—a little one——"

"Ye will?" John was incredulous. "Humph! 'Tis worth it. Come, then—but, no! 'Twould be foolish an' undignified for a man an' a maid to go rushing along the street in such a manner. 'Twould be absurd."

"John . . . a big one . . . yes?"

"Aye, that be better. I was waiting for that. Let's run, Marie. 'Tis getting late, anyhow, an' while we're eating supper I'll show ye something."

"Run, oh, run!" she entreated wildly, her breath almost choking her, her eyes dilated with fear.

And then John knew she was afraid and not merely indulging a whim. She was pale in the moonlight, almost haggard for one so beautiful.

"Run, it is, Marie," he said without further demur. "Give me your hand."

Hand-in-hand they ran up the gentle slope of Fish Street and turned into Candlewick Street. By the time they came to an alley leading from Budge Row, Marie was panting and breathing deeply with the exertion of the race, and John was laughing and chuckling inwardly again.

"Walk a while," he said. "Ye run well for a woman, but 'tis a hard mile from the bridge to the shop——"

"No, no, John! Run, run!" she cried impatiently.

" 'Tis greatly afraid ye be, Marie, an' ye're nearly spent. Shall I carry ye now?"

"No, no, I walk; I run. I ver' strong woman——"

"But, Marie——"

"No!" she snapped. "You not hold me, John. Always you want hold me. No!"

John paused when they came to the centre of the alley. On either side the houses rose close and dark, mean houses with dirty, broken, boarded, lattice windows and leaning gables that shut in the narrow space between. His face became stubborn and set.

"Well, then, Mistress Pert, I'll sit me down right here," he announced. "An' I've got the key."

"Robber-r-r! You not force me!" she stormed, frowning down at him. "I will not give in. No, no! Quick, John——"

"'Tis a dark, gloomy, fearful place, this," he commented. "Sit ye down beside me."

"Oh, the man mad!" she gasped distractedly. "Most obs'nate man! I cry—I scream—oh, John, I so ver' ill. My 'eart go bump, bump, bump! I must go——"

"Ye're spent, as I said. I'll have to carry ye, Marie," he observed. "Ye do look ill."

"Yes, ver' ill——"

"Then I'll carry ye," he said cheerfully, jumping up.

"Oh, it is not right. You tease me; you force me. I not wait—oh! Put me down, rude man! Robber-r-r! Stealer-r-r! I not like you——!"

But he did not put her down.

"I see you don't," he agreed. "Stop kicking, else ye'll lose your shoes—an' ye've got no others. 'Tis no use struggling, for I'm going to carry ye till ye have recovered somewhat. There, now! That's better, mistress."

"Oh, the good Virgin. I kick; I say not to touch me; I refuse, but no use is it," she whispered.

"Now ye're crying again. I be always making ye weep," said John remorsefully. He strode along rapidly.

"Weep? Ah, yes. I weep an' weep. I ver' sad. I ver' bad woman. I must go 'way. I must——"

John was startled. He looked down at her. Her dark eyes looked up into his through a mist of tears.

"No, surely! Go away?" he echoed in dismay. "But for why?"

"No, no! It is not'ing. I not go. My mind, sometimes it wanders. Ah, no, John."

"I've a mind to kiss ye. How I refrain from it I know not. 'Tis not easy," he muttered. "But I forced ye to let

me carry ye, so I will not force ye to kiss me. But, Marie . . . if ye . . ."

"It must not be, John! Ah, do not," she murmured so softly that he barely heard the words.

"Humph! 'Tis maddening! But, of course, ye cannot understand. But, Marie, I must tell ye—I must——"

"No, no, no, John! Ver' foolish man! I not listen!" she panted.

"That ye will," he said grimly, struggling to suppress his mirth, "for ye can do naught else. I tell ye, Marie—I've meant to tell ye——"

"Ah! It must be. I not help it!" She clung tightly to him and peered shyly into his averted face.

"I tell ye, Marie—" he began, and then paused again.

"Yes . . . ?"

"Marie . . . the pie ye cooked for dinner was burned," he said sorrowfully.

She gave a great start, and he felt her become rigid in his arms. Her dark eyes widened. Bewilderment, astonishment, and incredulity flashed in their depths.

"Pie!" she gasped. "Pie . . . ! ! You talk to me of—of pie?"

"Aye, pie!" mimicked John. "It was burned, Mistress Marie. 'Twas careless of ye."

"Oh . . ." she breathed. "The pie . . ."

"Ye seem dazed like, an' to have it on the brain," he tormented her.

"Put me down!" she suddenly commanded, struggling wildly.

He did, very quickly. She gasped and tottered and then stared coldly and haughtily at him.

"I walk now," she announced frigidly. To her furious eyes he seemed quite unconcerned.

"Ye may," he said imperturbably, "for ye wouldn't kiss me."

"Ah, bah! Kiss, kiss, kiss! It is ever all a man wants," she hissed at him.

"Ye forget the pie," he chuckled.

She did not deign to reply, and they hurried on in silence. Along Watling Street they walked, ignoring the cries and ribaldry of a low, uproarious fellow imprisoned in the stocks, past mighty St. Paul's that crouched and drowsed in the white moonlight. At last they came to the doors of the shop. When it was opened Marie darted through the darkness within. John laughed softly to himself as he heard her stumbling up the stairs. The door of her room slammed.

"There is no doubt of it," he joyously told himself as he closed and locked the door. "'Tis a wonderful dish is pie. 'Tis truly marvellous what it will reveal."

With a glowing ember from the hearth he lighted the two candles that stood in brass candlesticks on the sideboard. Then he mounted the stairs and knocked at her door.

"Have I offended ye?" he asked, grinning to himself.

"Go 'way!" came the muffled reply.

"I'll get the supper," he said generously.

"I not care for supper. I not care for you! I not care for anyt'ing," she called hotly. He thought her voice somewhat husky and tremulous.

"'Tis hard," he complained to the closed door. "An' I so wanted to be friendly—I who am to be married ere long——"

"Married . . . ?" She was quickly at the other side of the door. "Married? You, John?"

"Aye, Mistress Marie. I didn't tell ye before. It was a secret. But if ye'll come down to supper I'll tell ye all about her. 'Tis a wonderful girl she is—an'—an' I've got something to show ye."

"Yes, yes, John! I come, I come, now, John——"

But he was already half-way down the stairs. He did not seem to notice how swiftly she followed him.

"I've a mind to finish that burned pie, Marie," he said, glancing slyly at her. "Will ye not join me? 'Tis famished ye must be after your long run."

"I not hungry. Please to tell me about—" she paused, and then hastily began to prepare the supper.

"Wait," he said. "I want ye to stand still an' close your eyes."

"Ah!" she exclaimed, instantly all suspicion. "What you do?"

"Will ye, or will ye not do as I say?" he demanded sternly. "I have a surprise for ye."

"Yes . . . I not look. But not to touch me, John——"

"Touch ye? As if I would," he replied loftily.

Marie's eyes blazed, then they narrowed, then she resolutely closed them and stood motionless but apprehensive beside the little round table.

"I wait, John," she murmured. Impatiently she stood there, her ears trying to interpret the strange, stealthy sounds he made.

"Now," he said, laughing softly, "ye may turn an' look."

Quickly she turned. She looked from the table to him and then back to the table again. She could not speak, she did not move, but her eyes shone like twin bright stars at midnight. On the table was a dress of white velvet, a petticoat of blue satin, a short jacket of the same material, trimmed with black fur, a pair of black shoes with pretty red buckles, a pair of silk stockings, and a broad-brimmed, low-crowned white velvet hat with long golden black-barred pheasant's feathers upon it. For a little while she stood there looking at them in silence. Then again she glanced at his happy laughing eyes.

"Don't ye care for them, Marie?" he asked, coming to her side. "It be the new fashion for women. I—I would

have got ye something finer, but—but 'twas all I could afford. I thought the gold of the feather would match your lovely hair, the black your wonderful eyes, an' the white dress your good pure heart."

"What . . . what can Marie say to John?" her lips quivered as she spoke. "What to do for this great goodness? My heart—it pains me——"

She stood straight, and tall, and still. It seemed to her that an iron hand, cold and hard, gripped her heart when he alluded to the symbol of purity.

"They may be for the woman I'm going to marry——"

"Ah, John!" she gasped, retreating a step.

"Ye are the woman I'm going to marry. They be for ye, Marie," he whispered. "Now will ye kiss me?"

Her words came slowly.

"Yes, ah, yes," she said timidly. "I—I not want to do this thing, but, John, I no can help. I try so much—so hard not to do this thing——"

"But why?" he asked quietly.

"Ah, I must tell. I tell you all, John . . . then, then if you want Marie take her for wife. But first she must tell, must tell if she lose all . . . if she die . . ."

She pointed to the wooden bench beside the fire, and together they sat down. At first, she could not begin, then, hastily, desperately she told of the banquet and the flight from Genoa. She did not attempt to shield herself or to excuse her conduct, but made it plain that she shared the blame for what had happened. But she passionately and tearfully refuted responsibility for Rienzi's death. That had been arranged secretly between Mascagni and her lover without her knowledge. Not until she and her mother hurried past his writhing body did she realize that she had been made a pawn in a deeper, deadlier game.

John's mouth thinned to a hard line when she told of her lover's character. She did not disclose his name, and the man who listened did not ask. She spoke of how

she had followed him even as he had followed his prince; of life together at Calais; at Paris where his passion began to cool, and where her unnatural mother taunted and left her; at the Hague where, in the house within the shadow of the Hall of the Knights in the Binnenhof, he had struck her and thrown her down; of the final humiliating scene with him beneath the old grey stone arch of the prison gate that proudly bore the arms of Holland. Here, before the curious, inquisitive eyes of both men and women, he had laughed at, and reviled her, had mocked and cursed her, and then had turned scornfully on his heel and finally left her unprotected, and an object of derision. How the group of Dutch people laughed! How they jeered and heaped insult and indignity upon her! How they threw stones and refuse, and spat at her as she blindly fled from among them!

Then she traced her further descent; the manner in which she had crossed from Holland to England in a foul eel ship, alone, deserted, all but frozen by exposure to the bitter icy gales and seas of the Channel; how, in misery, pain, and wretched poverty she had existed during the terrible English winter, lived on until spring came and turned to summer, until her exhausted, maddened brain revolted at it all and drove her forth into the streets to die, as she thought, at the feet of a stranger.

She dared not look at the man beside her when she ceased speaking, dared not hope that his love still lived. The cold iron hand still gripped her heart. He sat very quiet and still, unconscious of her fearful suspense. After a little while he turned to her and very quietly said:

"'Tis sometimes the woman, 'tis more often not, an' who be I to judge . . . I that knew not even my mother's name, I that have never had to face the flesh an' the devil, for none has ever tempted me. Rest ye, Marie, an' be at peace, for I love ye truly, aye, most deeply do I love ye, an' will for evermore."

The thought of supper did not enter their minds until very late. It was later still when she struggled from his embrace and ran lightly up the stairs. His eyes followed her. She was radiant, a woman of surpassing beauty and loveliness from whom had fallen the dread mantle of the past. At the top of the stairs she paused and called softly down to him:

"Marie is ver' happy at last, my John. It is indeed to heaven you bring her. Always will she wear the white, always will she be worthy. For you an' for herself will she pray this night, an' on her knees give thanks for God's goodness an' pardon. Ah, John. . . . it is too good . . . too sweet . . . I fear much."

John sat staring into the red embers of the fire, and what he saw therein was known only to himself. Although the heart of each was throbbing with the delight and happiness of love, each mind was conscious of a shadow, the limping shadow of a cripple, that had fallen across it. Fear was behind their unspoken thoughts, fear of this deeply wronged powerful man. While he had listened to her recital in amazed, almost stunned silence, the courage that was in him recognized the fine courage that had prompted her to speak. Surely the woman in the room above him was not she who had done this thing. Nay, that woman was dead. Nevertheless, the confession created within his mind a certain purpose. He determined to confront this Balsamo. There must be no further deception or misunderstanding, no doubt or dread. During the small hours of the early morning he pondered the problem, and just before daylight came he rose resolutely to his feet.

"Aye," he muttered, "it must be done. For my own peace of mind, as well as Marie's, I must discover the character and intention of the greatly-injured man. 'Tis all too terrible. But for him it must have been doubly so. But, maybe, he will be merciful; maybe he will forgive, e'en though he may not forget. I'll leave a letter

with Vargo for Marie. He will comfort her whilst I be absent. 'Tis all I can do."

The dominant impression in the mind of each when they parted must be recorded.

"What temptation! What trial and tribulation has been her lot," thought John. "Ah, pretty Marie, ye are but little more than a child, a trusting, hurt, repentant child."

"He is pliant! He is like a rough but flexible staff in my hands. And so he shall remain," thought Marie. "It is well I spoke the truth. It was the truth that held him. How joyful, how relieved, am I! How he does love me!"

So delighted was she with his gift, and with his simple love, that she quite forgot to pray. She dressed herself, admired the hat, and smiled at the pretty shoes. For a long time she studied her reflection by the dim light of the candle. John saw its gleam when he left the shop.

"She is at prayer," he murmured happily.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Now, verily, thou art a fool!" groaned Panizzi. "Sala, why in the name of thy worthless Arab prophet didst thou tell him? Look and see the result of thy foolish tongue. Now hast thou opened the white-hot gates of hell for us all. He is mad! His senses are flown! Heathen, observe thy work!"

Panizzi rubbed his head furiously. He was leaning against the capstan, just aft of the mainmast. Sala raised his eyes to the poop and watched the limping figure of Balsamo.

"It is nothing," he said. "Uhuh! The master but walks and walks and walks. It is nothing, O hairless one! He walks much. The master was not born to kill. His fury, O hairless one, ever turns against his own heart."

"Complacent rogue," grumbled Panizzi. "Thou knowest well he is all but insane. All through the night until now, until the sun peeps above the river, hath he walked and walked and walked. It is like the last night and morning in the *palazzo* on far-away Genoa's slope. Where are thine eyes? See his terrible glance, his cruel lips! And do not call me 'hairless one'."

"Uhuh!" grunted Sala. Panizzi's aggrieved tone made no impression upon him. "I did but obey, O hairless one! I but told the master what I did see. How was I to know he would do this because another carried the red-haired one, the blood-taster, in his arms? Uhuh! She is ever in a man's arms."

"Truly thou art witless. After all that hath passed, after all that he hath endured, thy addled brains could not think to keep that from him. Thy great, gaping mouth must blurt out the words that scourged him like the strokes of a whip. Fool! What man wants to know the woman he desires is lying in the arms of another? Answer me that, numbskull! What man, however gentle and forgiving, can without fury bear the thought of his beloved's lips pressed to another's? Art thou bereft of all sense? Art thou such a savage that thou art oblivious of the sting of unrequited love? Bah! I could have kicked thee. Now do not yawn when I speak so to thee, unmannerly dog!"

"Thy tongue is like the slapping of the waves on the ship's side," said Sala in a bored tone. "It hath a dreary sound, O hairless one! Doth the master intend to walk all day as well as all night?"

"Up and ask him," returned Panizzi sourly.

"I would eat," Sala announced, ignoring the other's words and manner.

"Ho, ho! He would eat! Would he ever do otherwise?" sneered Panizzi, addressing the world at large.

"What food is for the day?"

"Fish!" snapped Panizzi.

"Uhuh!"

Sala did not intend to starve, and he did not intend to eat fish. His tremendous arms shot out and gripped Panizzi. Swiftly and easily he spun that startled person round and marched him to the bulwark. Then, although Panizzi struggled and fought furiously in silence, he put forth his amazing strength and lifted the writhing, kicking man over the side of the ship and held him by the stout collar of his doublet.

"Now, what sayest thou, O hairless one?" Sala demanded solemnly. "What food is for the day? If thou again sayest fish, then will I send thee in search of it. But if thou sayest meat then will we go together. Speak, O hairless one!"

"I but jested with thee, dear Sala," cried Panizzi softly, gazing down fearfully at the flowing water. "Do not let me fall, good Sala, for thou knowest how fond of thee I am——"

Sala lowered his arm quickly, and Panizzi cried wildly:

"Meat, meat, meat!" he yelled. "I vow it, I promise it!"

"Uhuh! And is the sacred Mohammed worthless, O hairless one?"

"Nay, good, gentle Sala! He is a worthy saint, a great warrior, a wonderful lover, a marvellous prophet. Do not let thy fingers slip, dear Sala," panted the unhappy Panizzi.

Sala heaved his victim over the bulwark on to the deck.

"It is well," he said. "O hairless one, I have long known that thou devourest great stores of meat when all others pick at the fish. The shining head respects thy church, but not thy fat paunch. That hath no church. Fish! Uhuh! I will follow thee."

"So thou hast spied upon me—" began Panizzi in an injured tone, his little, deep-set eyes flaming at the Nubian.

"The master hath long known that thou art two-faced," Sala informed him. "He, also, hath watched thee tearing at the meat like a ravenous dog at a dead carcass."

"What—Guiseppe?" Panizzi was taken aback and turned red with confusion.

"Uhuh! He but shrugged his shoulders and turned away. He is no priest to give thee penance. See, O hairless one, he is even now beckoning to thee."

Not until Panizzi was on the poop did Sala's grim features relax. Then he grinned a wide, expansive grin and leaned back against the capstan with an air of contentment. His black eyes narrowed lazily as he watched the two men. The wind that blew from the east was cool, but the rays of the early sun were warm and comforting to his wild heart.

The river was dull and grey under a mackerel sky. There were clouds of mist touching its surface, vapours that were rolled and split by the freshening breeze. Between the cliffs of fog were open spaces of water on which the morning life of the river was visible. Through the moving wall of mist the spires and windows of the city flashed in the early sunlight. Plume-like smoke from wood fires floated and streamed from a forest of crooked chimneys on either shore. Shout answered shout, and echo mocked the call. Debris moved and floated on the wind and tide-driven surface of the water.

Sala's interest deepened when he saw Balsamo grip Panizzi's arm and limp with him to the high bulwark that enclosed the poop. The merchant pointed down at the water with his stick. Impelled by curiosity, the Nubian moved across the deck and leaned his huge shoulders out so that he might see past the bulging superstructure. He saw a wherry approaching the ship, and seated therein was the young man who had held the fiery red-haired woman in his arms. So surprised was the Nubian that he grunted.

"Uhuh!" he said. "The master's words were words of truth and wisdom when he said that God first makes mad those He would destroy. Now is his meaning clear to me."

He heard his name called, and he hastened on to the poop.

"Sala, carry me to my apartment," commanded the merchant peremptorily. "Panizzi, conduct this man to the cabin wherein Mascagni drank with such terror."

The eyes of Panizzi and the Nubian met for a fleeting instant. Was this man of ice and steel the man they had known? Then Sala lifted his master in his strong arms and descended the steps.

Under Panizzi's direction, the stout rope-ladder was lowered and adjusted. He beckoned John Steele to follow him.

When alone in his cabin Guiseppe Balsamo limped to the silver crucifix. He crossed himself and knelt on the soft cushions. His eyes were aflame as they stared at the image on the cross; his hands were clenched, and his shaking arms uplifted.

"Give me, O Supreme Judge," he whispered passionately, "the strength and will to play my part. Give me the power to dissemble before my enemies, these that toss my heart from hand to hand. Bestow upon me that infinite patience with which to prosecute my justice. Sustain me in these bitter hours so that I may crush them one and all."

He bent forward and kissed the feet of the silver image, and then, after again crossing himself, rose to his feet and remained motionless in meditation.

"Justice!" he breathed. "Never again to babble of love. Justice! I will have her as I swore to do. Then shall she suffer, and taste the salt of tears and the sting of death. Many times shall its cold lips touch hers before it folds her in its last embrace! And I shall stand, and turn, and laugh, even as she did unto me. After that——"

He paused and looked at the crucifix. The sweat

gathered in beads on his brow, the result of his effort to compose himself and conquer the twitching of face and limb. Long minutes passed before this was accomplished, and then he opened the panel and stepped through into the larger cabin.

And so, in this brief manner, did Guiseppe Balsamo beseech his God to become a partner in the vengeance he had planned. So did he kiss the feet of the crucifix, his church's emblem of the supreme pure heart. So did he arise believing in his embittered mind that a God of love would stoop to lend his aid to a man of hate. So did he cast from him the sweet attribute of mercy. So his feet trod at last the path that leads to everlasting darkness. Once again in the dawn he had surrendered himself to the soothing spirit of evil, had sundered and cast away the lingering tender ties of clemency and love, had again vowed to destroy, had solemnly sworn it at the crucified feet of Christ.

For a moment he stared at John Steele in silence, black, terrible hate rocking him as he stood. Then he forced a little smile to his lips and bowed slightly. John, not to be outdone in courtesy, returned it.

"Sir, you are abroad early this morning," said Balsamo. "Will you accept of Guiseppe Balsamo's hospitality?"

"I thank ye, Signor," John replied, closely watching the merchant's pallid convulsive countenance, "but I have already eaten at Angelo's. I went there to inquire where you might be found. Signor, I will be direct. By the merciful providence of God, the woman ye seek in this great city was brought to me——"

"By whom?" inquired Balsamo quickly. He walked to the table of polished mahogany and leaned upon it.

"By no human agency, Signor——"

"Please be seated, Master Steele—that is if you can forgive my conduct towards you on a former occasion. But my excuse for that is simple and sufficient. So deep

is my love and anxiety for this woman that I fear it oft-times leaves me absent in mind and somewhat rude."

"Your love, Signor? Can it be ye still love her?" asked the amazed John.

"And why not, Master Steele?" returned Balsamo gently. "She is still my betrothed, but, naturally, you know nothing about that."

"I know all, Signor," said John, his blue eyes held by the dark, bloodshot ones of the crippled merchant. "And for that reason I be here."

"And she?" asked Balsamo softly.

"Knows not that I be here, for she sleeps happily and securely beneath my roof."

"Ah! She is happy?" The ferrule of his stick bored into the thick rug.

"Until last night she was unhappy. Her secret was a burden that crushed her. Now that burden has been lifted from her mind and heart."

"By whom?"

"By me, Signor."

"You are kind and generous, Master Steele."

"I love her, Signor," said John simply and with quiet dignity.

"And she?" murmured Balsamo.

"Has honoured me by returning my affection. She has promised to be my bride——"

To John's surprise and deep indignation, Balsamo laughed heartily.

"Ah," he said wearily. "Accept my congratulations, Master Steele. You are the third man who has listened to that promise. But, seemingly, Castlehaven was the wisest of the three."

"Castlehaven?" asked John sharply. "What has the Earl to do with this?"

"Then you do not know all," the merchant retorted.

John retreated a step, for what he read in the other's eyes enlightened him.

"So it was he—" he said gruffly.

"Yes, Master Steele. I feel honoured that you should come here to tell me this. Such consideration commands my gratitude."

"Castlehaven!" said John again. His blue eyes were as cold as Arctic ice, yet upon his brow was a flush that slowly crept down over face and body.

"It is a matter for discussion, Master Steele. Let us be seated, for it will take a little time."

John sat down on the edge of the chair nearest to him.

"Signor," he said, looking directly at the merchant, "I have come to know whether ye have forgiven her, or whether ye still seek vengeance upon her?"

Balsamo smiled at such expectant crudity.

"Vengeance? Such a harsh word, Master Steele. No, no! She has nothing to fear from me. I have searched long so that I might find and comfort her. Forgive? Forgive . . . ? Of course I have forgiven. My heart is tenderness itself towards her. And does she fear me?"

"Yes; but now she will be overjoyed, Signor. And ye still love her?"

"You seem surprised, Master Steele," said Balsamo, laughing slightly. "To my sorrow, I am not a man who loves lightly. I cannot love a woman one day and forget her the next. I am not Castlehaven——"

"That evil dog!" said John explosively.

"Perhaps it is not strange we should agree on that point," the merchant continued. "Were I like you—young, strong, and so deeply in love with the woman he——"

"Stop! Enough, Signor!" cried John.

"Sir, I perceive you are sensitive. It is not pleasant to think of——"

"Signor, I will not listen," John interrupted in an angry tone.

"No . . . ? I had not thought the barb so deeply buried in your heart, Master Steele. I ask pardon, but you will acknowledge me privileged to speak thus. Will you tell me of her, of how she came to you, and what has transpired since then? I confess a very natural curiosity, and one you will surely understand."

"Signor, forgive me," said John. "In my anger against that man I had forgotten that ye, too, love Marie. I had forgotten that ye, too, have suffered."

"Perhaps you do not know what I have suffered," murmured Balsamo, his burning eyes half-hidden by their drooping lids. "But the story, if you will?"

He listened without comment or question while John told of the finding of Marie, of their growing love, and of their betrothal and her confession.

"And you think her nature changed, Master Steele?" he asked when John ceased speaking.

"It cannot be doubted," was the emphatic reply. "Surely you do not suggest such repentance to be an artifice?"

"You would not believe me were I to do so," said Balsamo, smiling slightly. He was thinking of the time when he was as credulous, as easily influenced, as faithful and as assured of his betrothed's sincerity and guilelessness as this confident, infatuated man. "But I suggest nothing, Master Steele, unless it is that Castlehaven is laughing at his triumph."

"Laughing, be he?" growled John. He moved restlessly on the chair.

"I do not doubt it. Especially would he laugh at her."

"Ah, would he?" said John.

"Do not deceive yourself. He has laughed at many. Oh, that my arm were as strong as yours, Master Steele. Then would I see that he did not laugh."

"I will see that he does not laugh."

"No doubt others have said the same," said Balsamo

with just a suspicion of a sneer. "But when am I to be gladdened by the sight and presence of Marie?"

"Will ye come to my house, Signor? How pleasant for you an' she to be reconciled. How overjoyed she would be."

"I had planned to confront the Earl and, weak though I am, to punish him. But I fear my ability is not equal to my intention. Were that accomplished I would gladly accompany you. I could do so much for her . . . for you . . ."

"Signor, ye are too generous," cried John impulsively. "Such magnanimity is beyond anything I imagined."

The merchant studied the man before him and laughed softly to himself.

"You forget she was once betrothed to me," he said.

John flushed with sudden embarrassment.

"Ah, Signor, what can I say? What can I do?"

Balsamo was silent for a little while.

"You are strong," said he at last, "and were you jealous of your betrothed's——"

"Signor!" snapped John. He glared at the merchant.

"Well," Balsamo shrugged impatiently, "are you satisfied to suffer that man to mock you both for the rest of your lives?"

"Signor," replied John bitterly, "were he to meet me unarmed we should stand on common ground. Then would things be equal between us. But I know naught of sword-play or of the pistol. I can use my hands and my back, twirl a staff and swing a cudgel to some purpose, but the steel is strange to me."

"And to me," retorted Balsamo coldly. "But if it came to that I should not hesitate. I do not wish to imply that you are a poltroon or a coward, for that would be unkind and perhaps unjust, but it seems you do not feel so deeply as I."

"I do not fear death, if it be for her," said John. His tone was as frosty as the other's. "But, were I to be murdered, would it improve matters?"

"I cannot blame your caution, Master Steele," was the soft reply. But the merchant's shoulders moved disdainfully.

"Caution? Caution? Rot me, Signor! You misunderstand me!" cried John hotly.

"Well . . . perhaps," muttered Balsamo. "But she is now yours. It is not for me to suggest this or that. But were she still mine—ah, your pardon, sir. If you are content to allow him to—but, again, your pardon. It is, of course, your affair."

"Signor, ye said ye were about to go to Castlehaven's house?"

"That was my intention," the merchant assured him.

"Have ye a sword?"

"I have a good sword, but, alas, a broken arm to wield it."

"Then I pray ye give it to me, an' together we will go in search of him," said John.

"Then you are not afraid?" Balsamo seemed surprised.

"Signor!" ejaculated John furiously. He rose to his feet and glared at the cripple.

"Oh, pardon me, Master Steele, but I did indeed misunderstand you," said Balsamo humbly. "I now see my mistake. But, first, a little refreshment, for there is ample time. His lordship will yet be abed. I shall show you my ship. I heard that Castlehaven indulged in his usual gallantry at last night's ball at Whitehall. It is a grand opportunity for you, Master Steele, to avenge the woman you love—that we both love, if you will not be jealous of me."

"Signor, I cannot tell how glad I be that I came here this morning," cried John.

"But not so glad as I," murmured Balsamo.

CHAPTER NINE

THE mansion of the Earl of Castlehaven was most agreeably built above terraced lawns and gravelled walks on the alder-shaded north bank of the Thames, some distance from the boundary of Westminster. From the stone landing-steps, round which fish darted and stately swans glided, the aspect was pleasant enough. But the house and the grounds that surrounded it were not so well kept as the humbler dwellings and orchards that peered through clipped hedges and over green meadows near-by. The once-proud estate was neglected: the grass grew long and rank, the box-hedges were unclipped, straggling clumps of yew and ilex stood forlorn and forgotten, and the beauty and formality of the former Earl's once choice Italian garden gone for ever. A few straggling roses clung to decaying woodwork, and drooping, half-hidden plants fought defiantly yet sorrowfully for the full beauty that would never be theirs. Grass peeped, like some shy intruder, through the bare patches on the walks. The paintwork had long ago peeled from the timber of the house, and doors, windows and high, commanding gables were cracking and blistering in their vain battle with the elements.

It was a charming old Tudor house, partly remodelled and filled with lofty, carved ceilings, exquisite panelling, and staircases that were works of art. The grounds that once were so delightful could again, with attention, become charming, but the present Earl would never give this very necessary attention to his property, for he was not, and could not be, a charming man. He could not see the dying garden for the allurement of bright, sparkling eyes, could not hear the river singing by for the shrill, provocative laughter of painted women. The fine heart of the old house was surely becoming rotten through neglect, even as his was becoming more and more corrupt through dissipation and unbridled licentiousness.

Precisely at nine o'clock in the morning of the same day that John Steele boarded the ship of Guiseppe Balsamo, the Earl of Castlehaven was gently awakened from dreamless, untroubled slumber by his servant. His lordship sat up in his bed, and then sank back against the rearranged pillows and prepared to listen to a résumé of the previous night's adventures. This proceeding was his custom when opportunity and leisure permitted, for he found it profitable and greatly advisable to listen to the unclouded, critical recapitulation of one he could trust. And the only person whom he favoured with his confidence and reliance was Diogenes Snoop, his servant.

"Zooks!" he grunted, eyeing the silver tray that supported chocolate. "Snoop, you infernal cynic, am I never to snatch a little sleep?"

"M'lord, it is nine o'clock," the man replied respectfully. His bearing was deferential. "Is the chocolate to your lordship's taste this morning?"

"I shall know that presently. My blood! A devilish night! To start off with—Snoop!"

"Yes, m'lord?"

"I have a plaguey question I want answered."

"Yes, m'lord?"

"What would you do, Diogenes, my cynic, were you to discover that you—discover, mind you, suddenly, disconcertingly, amazingly discover—that you had a brother?"

"Why, nothing, m'lord," replied the astonished Snoop.

"Humph! I believe you. Well, let it pass. I have a dim recollection that I lost ten thousand pounds to Buckingham. Is that so?"

"Yes, m'lord. The Duke won that amount from you," was the soft answer.

"Stab me!" breathed the Earl. "Another doublet of diamonds for his grace. Zounds! Snoop, how in the name of the devil am I to pay?"

The man shook his head and assumed a mournful expression.

"I don't know, m'lord," he murmured.

"Sink me! but you are damnably dense of late, Snoop," snarled Castlehaven. "Get me an easy Jew."

"Your pardon, m'lord, but there are no Jews—especially easy Jews."

"Ha! No estate, no Jews. I see what you mean. Humph! Snoop! Cease crawling about the room and attend to me! You look like a weasel about to gnaw through the furniture. The manner in which you eye those bandy French chairs suggests it."

"Yes, m'lord," muttered the servant. He gave a final tug at the long curtains that shrouded the window. Castlehaven watched him in silence and then rapped out:

"Well?"

"She is still here, your lordship, and is most disconsolate."

"She? She . . . ?" Castlehaven slowly sat upright, his brows creased in two deep lines above his prominent nose.

"Pretty Peggy Winthorpe—the ribbon-maker's daughter. You escorted her—ah, that is—you persuaded her to come here last night after the ball——"

"Oh, good Lord! I had forgotten the wench. Split me! Blood and damnation, Snoop! Why haven't you got rid of her?" his lordship roared, tossing the tray on to the floor beside the bed.

"M'lord, she would not go. She says you forced—ah, that is, m'lord, she is alternately weeping and raging——"

"Oh, give the little fool money and be rid of her. A fine mess you have got me into, Snoop! What if she were seen here—faugh!" he snarled. He stepped from the bed and kicked the tray aside. "Give her money!"

The man hesitated. He seemed to be pondering deeply.

"Snoop!"

"Yes, m'lord . . . but, m'lord, I have no money."

"Ha! Give her money, Snoop! And see she departs!" The Earl's tone was harsh and threatening.

"Yes, m'lord, yes, m'lord—I will do what I can, m'lord—cold water, m'lord?" Diogenes Snoop shot a wicked glance at his master. But he still cringed in his servile manner.

"I wish I could sink into a block of ice. Snoop, I burn, my blood is like hot lava. Yes, idiot! As cold as it can be got. And what of Mistress Hartford? Did my ambitious fiancée remain in town?"

"She fled to Oxford by swift chaise, m'lord."

"Then that is an end to that," his lordship said, laughing shortly. "Like Icarius, my wings are becoming unstuck under the hot sun of misfortune. She must fly alone. Curse Charlie for keeping me watched so closely! Snoop, what can I do to sweeten his majesty?"

"Pass the ribbon-maker's pretty daughter on to him, m'lord—oh!—ach! Nay, nay, m'lord! Your pardon—mercy! Oh!—ah!—ah! . . ."

Snoop screamed under the pressure of his lordship's vice-like fingers.

"Insolent dog! Snoop, I have a mind to wring your neck. Speak so again of the king and I will have you whipped." The Earl released the man and then kicked him across the room. "Faugh! Life is nothing but wenches, debts, duns, duels, and insolents. My bath, rogue! And then my breakfast! And do not poison it!"

The servant gathered up the tray and broken china and scuttled from the room. The door closed behind him. He snarled soundlessly and shook a tightly-clenched fist in the direction of his master. Then, rubbing the back of his neck, he hurried away, muttering viciously to himself.

"Aye, you haughty, high-bred dirt! 'Tis 'Snoop, do this and that!' 'Tis 'Snoop, get me that woman and get rid of this one.' 'Tis 'Snoop, the dog! the insolent! the filth!' But, my fine gentleman, 'tis Snoop that will repay.

'Weasel', forsooth! Well, Snoop has knawed a tidy piece out of your lordship's estate—he!—he!—he! Snoop can buy his master—he!—he!—he! Snoop could buy his master's women, his master's liberty, his master's life. Mayhap he will—he!—he!—he!"

Castlehaven's trusted servant vanished. The doors, one after the other, right through to the kitchen, could be heard slamming after him.

The Earl frowned and then laughed.

"Diogenes crawled forth from the wrong end of his tub this morning," he muttered. "The rat! But now, in truth, am I in a foul situation—a devilish plight. Disaster is suspended over me by as fine a hair as ever supported the sword of Damocles. The king is my salvation, yet he distrusts me. What to do? Shall I cultivate Clarendon or the beautiful Barbara Palmer? Charles's brain or his heart? Methinks his heart, for it is easy and soft and overrides his mind. I shall gain the ear of the Royal concubine. Faugh! I vow 'tis all too devilish that I should go smirking like the veriest sycophant to such . . . And I hear the cripple is in London. Pshaw! He matters not."

The Earl's countenance was marked with gloom as he sat waiting for the summons to his bath. For the moment he saw no way out of the entangling, thorny wood of debts and amours that had shot up, rank and reeking, around him; no manner in which to placate his king. A dark, brooding mood settled upon him. He was no exception to the class that finds morning a pitiless period.

However, after a plunge in the cold water imprisoned in the bath of red marble, and a breakfast of light and tasty dishes, he submitted himself to be shaved, perfumed and powdered by Snoop with the air of one who again finds life most agreeable. The business of being civil to his many creditors among the lace-makers, wig-makers, shoe-makers, ribbon-makers, tailors, hatters, glove-makers, and other priests of fashion that were now thronging his apartment

was somewhat trying to his temper, but he delighted them all with promises of early payment. He selected a monstrous, bushy, black wig, yards of ribbon, ordered more expensive clothes, hose and shoes, and then graciously returned their bows when they tramped out of the room.

"Snoop, the pests must have heard that last night I lost ten thousand to the Duke," he said with a laugh. "Verily it pays to play high."

"The higher the play the lower the fall," murmured Snoop sententiously as he put the last touches to his master's toilet.

"What did you say? Speak out, man! You mumble like a toothless old hag with a bone."

"M'lord, I said there are few who play so high or so bravely as you," returned the evasive and obsequious Snoop.

"Humph! Fetch me that long glass and then hold it whilst I glance at myself. And be quick, for I hear the laughter of women and steps upon the gravel. Early though it is, the wherries must be arriving, and the women—these women, Snoop—are devilish contrary and impatient."

"Yes, m'lord," agreed Snoop. The glass he carried was as tall as himself and very nearly as heavy. He silently cursed the Earl's laziness in declining to walk the few paces to where it had stood. As each hour went by he felt more and more tempted to heed the cripple's advice and profit by his suggestion and offer. In any case, the Earl was on the brink of ruin; there was now little left to steal or worth stealing; therefore no reason to remain loyal. "Yes, m'lord. Will that please your lordship?" he grunted, struggling with the heavy glass.

"You are damnably clumsy and incompetent this morning, Snoop," swore his lordship sourly. He could not see his crimson velvet shoes in the glass. "Tilt the curst thing, fool! Tilt it, I say!"

"Yes, m'lord," breathed Snoop.

"'Sblood, Snoop! Do you imagine this cravat decently

tied?" fumed the Earl. "Come and do it again, else shall I be sneered at for my ill-appearance. To look at it one would think you wished to strangle me. Your fingers outrage the new fashion. The world has gone beyond the Van Dyck collar, stupid!"

"Yes, m'lord," choked Snoop. He carefully made the required adjustment to the flowing ends of the cravat, and his master was at last satisfied and pacified. His lordship did not deign to assist, but was content to allow his servant's dexterous fingers to do the work while he swore and complained irascibly.

"This short, silver piped, crimson jacket that shows the quality of my linen is very elegant, Snoop. 'Tis an improvement on the old doublet."

"Yes, m'lord."

"These petticoat breeches, now. Already they resemble a ruffled pigeon's breast with the countless loops of ribbon upon them. Does the garment become me, Snoop?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"Rogue, I have doubts! If I am twitted by the company your skin shall pay for it."

"Yes, m'lord," gulped Snoop.

"Then attend to all this litter of ribbons, powders, perfumes, wigs, and the rest. Is all in readiness for the guests?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"And the ribbon-maker's daughter? What of the wench?"

"I sent her away, m'lord."

"Ha! 'Tis well for you, rascal!"

The Earl turned his elegant back upon the cringing servant and walked from the room. He carried his feathered hat in readiness for the bow that so became his figure and so captivated the fair ones with its sweeping homage. Perhaps he would have been surprised, certainly he would have been furious, had he turned and chanced

to see his trusted man gyrating in a mad dance of destruction on one of his expensive and unpaid-for wigs. But he did not turn, nor did his ears catch the hissing stream of threat and vituperation poured on his proud head by the rebellious and exasperated Snoop.

"I'll sell ye, ye proud dog!" the infuriated man choked. His voice squeaked and rasped as he spat out the words. "I'll sell ye into slavery—a worse hell than the one I've endured so long. To-night ye go to Bankside. To-night will ye be lured to a ship of which I know—a ship with a black and red hull—a ship that will break your heart, strip your fine feathers, and sell your naked carcass to the vultures of the plantations—he!—he!—he! And the cripple will pay me well. Many's the pretty wench ye have ruined, to-night a pretty wench shall take revenge for the others—he!—he!—he! I will do it—I swear I will! May ye rot in chains for ever, ye haughty filth! Aye, m'lord, Snoop will repay."

CHAPTER TEN

The Earl had planned a yacht race on the pellucid, tree-fringed, meadow-scented reaches of the Thames as the first part of the day's diversion and entertainment. Then all were to proceed to Newgate to view the quartered body of a notorious murderer exhibited in a barrel of pickle. The women especially wished to see the mangled remains of one whose fascination had cost their sex dearly. Then would they see sleek, swift race-horses in action. At night Castlehaven intended to transport his guests to Bankside, so that they might witness the latest libidinous comedy in one of the theatres there. The Earl was satisfied that his friends, and the friends that accompanied them, would approve of his programme. Then those who wished to

do so could return to his house, to gamble, to drink, or to be as salaciously merry as they desired.

When the merry Charles II ascended the throne of England old manners and both moral prejudices and safeguards were overturned and swept away by those who danced in the reflected light of Royalty. New shibboleths and standards of loose conduct were created and established. Everything the Puritans held dear was mocked and reviled. Pure love and healthy laughter crept away shamefaced before brazen satyriasis and nymphomania. The moths and butterflies that fluttered round the Royal flame winged their way without restraint. They sought only pleasure, and found it when, where, and how they could. By day and by night they came and went, each dizzy mind straining to create some new diversion, each form parading the dazzling decrees of the new fashion.

It was the custom of gallants to throng the boudoirs of fashionable women at this hour of the morning, to take snuff, to sip chocolate, coffee, or wine, and to exchange wit and gossip with each other and with the woman seated at her glittering toilet-table; and it was not unusual to discover women of both esoteric and exoteric circles indulging in a daring visit to the house of some desired gallant.

The reception-room, wherein the Earl's guests were assembled, was gay and garish with bright carpets, gilded French furniture, numerous large, gleaming mirrors, and brilliant colours. Its effect upon the eye was striking, gaudy and bizarre. It was an inharmonious whole and not unlike a huge, gilded cage draped with bands of colour torn piece by piece from a rainbow. Yet it was an appropriate setting for the human peacocks that strutted and posed and vied one with another in the display of their sumptuous plumage.

A powdered, bewigged footman in the Earl's silver and blue livery pompously announced his master's presence to

the laughing, quizzing, chattering men and women. His lordship's bow and the sweeping flourish of his wide, feathered hat were models of studied grace. For a brief fraction of time he remained in this pose, and it was sufficient to enable his guests to rivet their admiring eyes on his elegant apparel. He was highly gratified at the loud whispers of approval that reached his ears. In the throng were a few noted exquisites, conspicuous in their costly habilaments, and to win their unqualified praise was soothing to his vanity.

His keen, appraising stare swept the assemblage, and he was quick to see that fresh, fair faces were present. As he slowly walked towards his guests he observed the black and powdered silver wigs; the beautiful materials and colours of the women's full, flowing dresses and petticoats; the silver, gold, blue, red, black and dove-grey shades that blended exquisitely in the velvets, silks, satins and rich brocades; the black patches on the rouged cheeks and chins of both sexes, improvements on the dimples and the pimples of impartial nature; the flaunting ribbons and flashing jewels; the arrangement of the women's hair over their ears and foreheads; the curls and wisps that peeped so carelessly yet so meaningly from under their wide, low-crowned, feathered hats. But his eyes dwelt longest on their roving, sparkling eyes, their powdered bosoms exposed in a manner meant to be alluring above low-cut bodices, and the dainty ankles which they managed to reveal with truly feminine ingenuity.

With the sure instinct of the born and practised gallant, the Earl made his way to the side of a woman whose beauty, coy, coquettish glances and subtle invitation promised, at the very least, an interesting morning. But scarcely had he raised her hand to his lips and murmured his eternal devotion and homage in response to the introduction, barely had she rewarded him with a flashing glance and winning smile, when, to their amazement and anger, and

to the unbounded astonishment of all in the room, the resplendent footman came backing quickly through the doorway, protesting as he retreated in fear before a tall, cold-eyed man who carried a gleaming, unsheathed rapier in his hand. The sombre clothes and plain, steeple-crowned hat worn by the man stamped him as a very ordinary person. For a moment there was a portentous silence in the room, for the stranger had burst so suddenly upon their startled gaze that the thoughts of many turned upon the supernatural. Then some irrepressible cavalier ejaculated:

"Well, b'gad! 'Tis Jack Cade himself! But, rot me! the fellow's dead. Then 'tis the reincarnation of old Oliver. Stab me! Will the damned Roundheads never lie quiet?"

But no one moved. A naked blade in the hand of a determined man is not to be regarded lightly. Castlehaven measured the intruder with cool, wary eyes, in which deep interest, recognition and hate blended and sparkled. Then he spoke crisply to the terrified footman.

"Rascal, is it your duty and practice to permit every rough dog from the streets to wander at will into my house?"

"M'lord, m'lord, I crave your pardon, m'lord. This—this man would not heed me. He would force his way to your presence. Your pardon, m'lord, but he threatened me with death. . . ."

" 'Swounds!" swore his lordship softly. He dismissed the man and addressed the stranger. "Sirrah! What is the meaning of this armed intrusion? Is it now the habit of scum to pollute the very air we breathe? What means this outrage . . . why! Split me! 'Tis that meddling cockerel that . . . well, damn me! Blast my eyes and blood!" He inclined his head and whispered to the woman beside him: "Your indulgence and clemency, m'dear, but I must leave your fascinating, delightful self

for a little while. I vow 'tis like being torn from Aphrodite herself."

"Dear m'lord, spit him! Gut the fellow! Open the lout! But do not leave me for long," implored the painted nymph, fanning herself as though almost overcome, yet shooting bright, venomous glances at the cause of his lordship's desertion. With the utmost gallantry the Earl again raised her hand to his lips. Then he faced John Steele.

"Whom do you seek?" he demanded irascibly.

"You!" returned John with disconcerting brevity. He quite ignored the others.

"Ha! The cockerel turned rooster!" sneered the Earl. "What are you doing with that rapier? Know you not that it is a dangerous tool for fools and children to handle?"

"An' a handy one for rogues an' assassins," was the grim retort. "But the iron is only in case I must use it. An' ye be a man—ye posture bravely enough—ye will meet me with naked hands."

Castlehaven was honestly amazed. Then he laughed coldly.

"Your presumption, clod, is beyond belief. You challenge me and then choose the weapons."

"Did ye give Rienzi his choice?"

The question and the manner in which it was spoken brought the Earl up rigid. For a moment his easy poise deserted him. The guests began to whisper audibly, and the penetrating sound sent the blood to his lordship's brow and set his hard, blue eyes glinting frostily. In time he remembered he was the cynosure of all in the room. He relaxed and posed becomingly. His manner became languid and bored in the extreme. Deliberately he inhaled snuff. He was both haughty and graceful in the use of his kerchief. And all the time he stared into the eyes of the man before him, as though seeking to discover whether the will there was strong or weak.

"Rienzi! Ha! You come primed for this violence, I perceive," he murmured.

"Will ye meet me without weapons?"

The Earl laughed.

"'Sdeath! but the lout is persistent," he said. "Tell me why you come here in this furious manner. I am curious."

"Your lordship will not have forgotten Marie Pleyel——"

"Ha!" said the Earl. The laughter vanished from his eyes.

"Nor how ye brutally struck her down an' left her to starve——"

Castlehaven turned swiftly and spoke to the man who had aired his feeble wit at John's expense.

"My dear Saville, favour me with your blade. On my honour I promise not to soil it. This fellow wearies me. Ah, my thanks, my dear Saville. You select a beautiful bit of steel—balance, temper, feel, all are in it," he said, bowing to his friend. Then he confronted John. "Now, sirrah, we are on more equal terms. But, first, I would know your name."

"It be John Steele."

"And a devilish appropriate one for the occasion—" his lordship began. He then paused. His eyes had fallen to the hilt of the rapier. He stared at it in silence. Then he pointed to it and spoke rapidly.

"Whence got you that blade?"

"What matters it?"

"That rapier is my property, sirrah! Look upon the hilt and you will see the arms of my house emblazoned in diamonds, rubies and emeralds. Whence got you that blade?"

"Where left ye the blade?" retorted John impatiently.

"Ah! I thought it!" said Castlehaven grimly. "'Tis the cripple's plot. But why send you against me? 'Tis

poor flattery, or a most detestable compliment to so rate my ability. Give me the truth, now! 'Tis plain you are no swordsman."

"Your lordship should quickly discover that for yourself."

"True, but my wits are sharper than yours. I see you are infatuated, enslaved, but I also see deeper into this matter than you. Tell me: are you so deeply enamoured of this woman that you blunder and strut around with your eyes so tightly closed?"

"I be. Will ye fight, or must I again insult ye?"

"Poor fool! 'Tis almost too bad. But the steel it must be, for I decline to be mauled by a common lout. Come, then, sirrah! I await you!"

"Ye mean ye be ready to fight? Here? In this place?"

His lordship's grim mouth relaxed and he laughed. Anger left him, for his keen perception showed him that this courageous simpleton, although bound by the spell of Marie Pleyel, had been thrust forward by another like a sheep to the shambles. He knew who that other was. His rapier told the tale. He even admired a little the courage of this tall, serious, blunt man.

At this juncture, when all in the room were tense and eager to witness the strange quarrel, when the men forgot to strike attitudes and take snuff, and the women to flirt and pout and sigh and languish, the footman came striding hurriedly forward. His manner was one of suppressed excitement and importance. But, before he could speak, Castlehaven waved him brusquely aside. Again the man endeavoured to speak, and again he was dismissed and curtly commanded to remain silent and retire. The fellow's pompousness turned to perturbation, but he left the room without further attempt at speech.

"I want ye to know, my lord, that I came here to fight ye with or without weapons," John informed Castlehaven.

All in the room heard the words. John caught a glimpse of three men framed in the high, wide, white doorway. "Fight ye I will, an' I pray God to strengthen my arm so that ye shall suffer for your cruelty, your turpitude, an' for the dastardly heart that be in you."

"'Sdeath. Such crazy supererogation is beyond credence. To it, then, you preaching lout!" said his lordship harshly. "I will at least teach you civility and respect for your betters."

The Earl's back was towards the door, and he did not see the three men who were so interested in the amazing scene, did not see the hand of one go up in a gesture of warning, of silent command. His lordship was watching John with the contemptuous coolness of the master observing the novice. This interfering nobody must be taught his lesson.

John's crude, unorthodox swordsmanship immediately drew forth murmurs of surprise from the spectators. The central figure of the three in the doorway, he whose princely mien and rich garments of brocade and cloth of gold stamped him as a man of rank and power, exchanged whispers with his companions.

"God bless me, Buckingham," he said. "This impetuous citizen does not know one end of his blade from the other. He is slashing with the rapier as though it were a sword—or a sickle. There, my lords, is a perfect example of superb courage contesting against matchless skill. I think you will agree with me when I say that such courage is a gift from God. Skill is adventitious; courage is intrinsic. It is the nature of the man. It may lay dormant for long years, but if it is there it will sometime manifest itself. But if not—never! The courage of a man, my dear Buckingham, is above the pettiness and vanity of kings."

"In truth, sire, I have seldom seen you so in earnest,"

was the whispered response. "I am gratified that I persuaded your majesty to accompany me. Do you suggest, my liege, that the Earl is not courageous?"

"Pish! That is very crude angling, my dear Duke. The Rolands are bred to courage. The Earl does not number cowardice amongst his faults, and he has his share of them. But this stranger has no skill and must know it full well. And yet he deliberately faces one who is acknowledged as the finest swordsman in England—or Europe, for that matter. The Earl is a wizard. The power or the grace to so look upon death is not given to all. Watch this now, and I charge you to preserve that man. We are not concerned with their quarrel, but should the fiery Earl be tempted—restrain him! He has strange and unreasoning propensities of which we do not approve."

John was doing his poor best with the rapier, but it was mainly cudgel-play, and not sword-play, that he employed. The pliant, slender weapon sang through the air as he slashed at the Earl's blade. Occasionally, when he thought opportunity permitted, he stabbed furiously, only to find his rapier slithering impotently along the sword opposed to him. His lordship was grinning sardonically. He was as graceful and lithe as a dancing-master. With consummate ease he parried and avoided the thrashing, slashing, stabbing rushes of his adversary, and kept him at bay at the point of the sword. Already since the fight began he could have run his enemy through at least a dozen times. This John Steele, this unpolished fellow in whom Fate had decreed that he should be so vitally interested, had not even a rudimentary knowledge of the science. He was like an infuriated, animated windmill. Again and again his arm was raised to enable him to slash, repeatedly he left openings that were like wide targets to a swordsman. His clumsy work conjured forth ripples of laughter from the onlookers, and even the king smiled. Once, when he pressed forward impetuously, the Earl brought him to an

abrupt standstill by neatly pricking him over the heart. It was the merest touch, yet its message was plain and prophetic. The Earl toyed with him for the entertainment of his guests.

John now realized that he must change his tactics. He could not knock the sword from the other's hand, could not get his point through the impregnable defence. He saw that he had the advantage in reach, that his arm and rapier were together longer than the arm and sword of the Earl. Again he rushed in with the blade extended rigidly before him. The thrust was so simple to parry that Castlehaven laughed derisively as he disengaged and held his point at John's breast. His cold, impatient voice rapped out:

"Enough of this! A move and I run you through! Now drop that rapier—I command you to drop it!"

The jewelled weapon fell from John's hand, and the Earl kicked it away.

The Duke of Buckingham whispered to Charles:

"My liege, the citizen's courage does not outstrip his discretion," he said in an amused tone.

"There is more than prudence or discretion behind those icy, blue eyes. The Earl may yet find his adversary dangerous and a man to be respected," was the king's reply.

Castlehaven's voice went on:

"What say you that I should not inflict death upon you?" he asked, his bearing and tone arrogant and contemptuous. "I have but to thrust and it is an end of you."

"Then thrust, for I care not—" began John.

"On your knees, sirrah!"

John astonished the haughty Castlehaven by laughing.

"Ye were ever a bloody butcher," he retorted calmly. "I'll not kneel to ye—ye proud assassin! Aye, assassin! An', like all such, your right hand e'en now glows with the blood that stains it. It glows red, I say, with blood! That hand betrays ye to all in the room, an' all be looking

at it. They stare at it, for it be no longer white, but red and hot with blood. Look ye at it! It drips an' drips an' drips——"

Blood! The sign, the manifestation, the avatar of all that was sinister and cruel in the Roland character. The ineradicable, fateful stain superimposed on honour by dishonour. Blood! Castlehaven's brows were creased and dark with fury. His staring, baleful eyes shone with a murderous, unnatural light. But he looked at his hand.

John moved like an uncoiling steel spring. The Earl realized too late that he had been tricked by conscience and the power of another's will. It would not now matter if he did thrust, for his blade was grasped by other hands.

"'Sdeath!" he swore bitterly. His voice sounded loud in the silent room. The chuckling and the whispering had died away.

"As ye said but a moment ago, my lord, we be now on more equal terms," said John. "'Twas no doubt pretty to display your hellish knowledge to your friends. Now call upon what other knowledge ye have, for I vow ye'll need it."

With a mighty wrench he twisted the sword from Castlehaven's hands, and, to the horror and rage of the exquisite named Saville, snapped the fine blade across his knee.

"Oh, b'gad! He's broken it, b'gad!" wailed the infuriated owner of the weapon. "Stab me! Rot me! Blister me! Curse me, but the foul fellow has broken my sword!"

"We will finish this outside," Castlehaven announced coldly. He made to turn away, but was instantly spun round by a compelling hand.

"Nay, my lord," growled John. "Ye were content to show your infernal skill before this gathering of your friends. To so hold me up to laughter and ridicule was a clever thing to do. Now guard yourself with the weapons God gave ye."

"'Sblood! So be it!" rejoined the Earl with a shrug of his shoulders. "But 'tis damnably inconvenient and disgusting to be mauled——"

He got no further with his remarks, for John leaped upon him with ferocious speed and caught him round the waist with a grip that forced the air from his lungs. They struggled madly and lurched like drunken men. Blue eyes stared into blue eyes with the blazing fire of surging, ungovernable hate and fury behind them as they reeled and staggered in the terrible grip. The Earl countered with a vicious blow that broke John's lips and set his head ringing. The blood flowed freely from his mouth, for the jewels on his lordship's hand cut like knives. But Castlehaven could not break from that implacable, spine-breaking grip that was slowly but surely crushing the life from him.

The king turned to Buckingham as John lifted the Earl, sent him crashing to the floor, and then leaped upon him again and tore away his cravat so that his fingers might find the throat beneath. The ripping of linen and cloth, and the gasping and panting of the Earl, were heard by all.

"Part them and put an end to it," he commanded. "This lusty fellow will break the Earl's back if he does not strangle him first. We cannot permit that any more than to allow Castlehaven to split the determined one's ribs. We grow weary of the sport."

Amazement, fear, incredulity, satisfaction, contempt, intense interest, were all depicted on the faces of the staring, silent guests. The Earl's face was assuming a purple hue under the strangling pressure of John's fingers. His fine apparel was torn and disarranged, and partly hung in rags. His huge wig was on the floor some distance away. Beside it, as though guarding it, was the black, steeple-crowned hat. Castlehaven's lungs, denied the vital air, were cramped with agonizing pain. He kicked, he writhed, he gasped and shuddered, and his eyes were becoming glassy and wildly staring. But in spite of all his

frenzied efforts he could not shake off the grim avenger that bestrode him. It was a timely release for him when John was dragged away, to stand enraged and panting in the grip of a dozen hands. For a long moment the prostrate man lay gasping and gulping in the reviving air, then, when he had sufficiently recovered, he got to his feet with a furious leap and a shout and bounded to where the rapier lay. He was quite beside himself with rage and humiliation, and would, had he been permitted, have plunged the steel into the heart of the man who had so ill-used him. It was a quiet voice that arrested him.

"My lord! Put away that blade!"

Castlehaven turned slowly and saw the king. For a little while he stood staring and breathing heavily. It seemed to those who watched him that for the moment he refused to believe his eyes. Astonishment, dismay, shame, trampled pride, baffled arrogance, forced submission, all flashed upon and passed from his bold hate-distorted features. He dropped to his knee and bowed his head. And, as though performing a long-delayed duty, all in the room, excepting the king's companions, bowed and curtsied low. The Earl's voice was choked and thick.

"Sire," he said, "I await your further commands. I was not aware that you had honoured my house with your gracious presence."

"Rise, my lord," Charles replied dryly. Then his tone became sharp and scathing. "It has all been a sorry spectacle of passion and violence. We are not pleased with such unseemly conduct, and are reminded of the bull-ring. And do not glare so, my lord, else shall you hear words less pleasant and more forceful. Your attire is sadly disarranged, and we excuse you for the nonce . . . ah! My dear Buckingham! Who *is* that most charming, beautiful creature whose soft, curved lips are tinted like sun-kissed, exotic coral and whose kind eyes are warm and dark and starry like the heavens at midnight?"

And Castlehaven had the double mortification of being dismissed and of seeing his Royal master gracefully appropriate the pretty woman who, but a few short minutes ago, had promised in all but words to be so agreeable and entertaining. He was quivering and trembling with dreadful, suppressed rage as he left the room.

Charles turned to the group that held John.

"Release him," he said peremptorily. Then he turned away and was soon oblivious of all but the bright eyes and the radiant smile of his fair companion.

As John passed he heard the cynical Buckingham say softly to his friend:

"I'll wager a thousand we will not see Rowley again until to-night. Methinks he has this seductive Europa already on his shoulders. Stab me! but he has a devilish, keen eye for a willing beauty."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JOHN did not hear what was said in reply to Buckingham's sally. He looked neither to right nor left as he followed Castlehaven's example and walked backwards from the room. He then strode quickly from the house. Vainly he endeavoured to stanch the blood that flowed from his deeply-cut lips. His hat was gone and his tousled, yellow hair glinted in the sunlight. Blood was on his chin, his hands and his doublet. His face was still pale with the passion that lingered in his heart. Down the neglected path he walked until he came to the landing where the wherries were clustered. But he could see no sign of Guiseppe Balsamo's boat.

"'Tis strange, indeed," he muttered angrily, closely scanning the river in search of the craft. "Where can the cripple be? Rot me! He might have waited . . . if 'twere only for my body."

Feeling very disgruntled and disappointed with the unsatisfactory conclusion of the morning's adventure, he hailed a wherry and was soon being rowed down the river through the busy traffic. He intended to land at Blackfriars Stairs.

"I shall have a tale to tell Marie," he murmured. "Were it not for the king I would have choked the foul life out of the dog. But the cripple . . . 'tis devilish strange . . . I wonder did he lie to me. . . ."

He was the object of many curious stares as he tramped towards Ludgate, up Ludgate Hill, and along Ave Maria Lane. He was thankful when he turned the corner and entered Paternoster Row. The Sign of the Book and Key would be a welcome sight, for he was tired, hungry, and impatient to be with his betrothed. He increased his pace.

Imagine, then, his dismay and horror at observing a dense crowd gathered before the smoking ruins of his home. For a moment he paused like one suddenly robbed of the power of volition. He glared at the blackened remnant of the building as though bereft of his senses. Then, with a cry of despair, he frantically fought his way through the crowd until he stood at the charred door of the shop. Wildly he gazed about him and at the ruin before him. Marie! When someone touched him on the shoulder he whirled round and stared into the gleaming, burning eyes of Vargo the whisperer.

"Vargo! Vargo!" he gasped. "What of Marie? Where be she? What terrible calamity be this? Where——"

"She be safe," Vargo whispered. "Aye, truly she be safe."

He nodded his white head at some thought that flitted through his mind. John grasped his thin, bony arm.

"Speak, man!" he implored. "Where, in God's name, be she?"

"'Tis little I know, Master Steele," Vargo replied

reluctantly. "But I saw her go away in company of the cripple——"

"The cripple? The cripple?" stammered John. "He was here, then?"

"Aye, Master Steele," hissed Vargo. "Your own eyes can surely tell you that. You have but to look at the remains of your house——"

"Vargo! The fire! Not . . . not the cripple . . . ?"

"Aye, Master Steele," said the old man, shaking his white head. "His great blackamoor was the last man to leave the place. I saw the flames soon afterwards."

"Rot me! But that is terrible!" John burst out. "And Marie?"

Vargo again shook his head.

"Ah! Tell me, Vargo—" pleaded John.

"She seemed very happy, Master Steele. The cripple was most tender towards her—most tender, I should say."

"I must seek her! The house matters not. It is gone——"

"So be she, Master Steele," hissed Vargo. "Nay, nay, lad! Let well alone. She be not for ye, and if ye again venture into the cripple's power 'twill indeed be the end of ye. He will crush ye without pity. 'Tis the woman he wants. Let be and forget."

"Gone, be she?" snarled John. Vargo recoiled. "Stand aside, Vargo! I go for Marie! Aside, croaker! The cripple shall not have her."

Vargo's old eyes glittered malevolently as he watched John fight his way through the staring, gaping crowd.

"Aye, stupid fool!" he hissed softly. "Vent your spite on the cripple in black. 'Twas ye that caused Vargo great loss of money when ye found and made love to this beautiful woman. But 'tis Vargo, not the blackamoor, that has now caused ye this loss. Vargo was the last man to leave your house. Vargo was the man that poured oil upon the blazing hearth—huh! hs-s-s-s-s! Vargo would kill ye

could he but . . . but, nay! Glory to the Lamb of God! Vargo has another thought. No money shall he lose. Annie, Annie, ye witch! Ye must have willed me to think this. 'Tis clever of ye, Annie. 'Tis clever of me. 'Tis clever of us both, of us both—huh! Ho! ho! hs-s-s-s-s!"

He fought like one possessed to pass through the tightly-packed onlookers. When clear of the press he darted after John with astonishing agility for one so old. His spindle-like legs, in their wide, funnel-topped boots, pounded the cobbles of the street. He soon overtook John.

"Hear me, Master Steele," he cried in his sibilant voice. "I can be of great service to ye. I have a plan that will speedily regain your pretty Marie for ye. Nay, do not turn impatiently away. Vargo has long been in the cripple's favour and confidence."

"What?" cried John, astounded at this admission. "Ye have had dealings with this man?"

"Aye, that I have, Master Steele. The cripple trusts me, but never have I trusted him. Come to my house for a sup of good ale and I shall reveal to ye the only plan ye'll find successful. Lad, lad, if ye go clattering and forcing your way aboard his ship his foreign rascals will cut your throat for ye before ye know it. I have a better way, and the girl be safe for a little while. Come with me and Vargo will befriend ye."

John hesitated. Harried though he was by conflicting desires, he realized that there was truth and common-sense in the old man's words. He could not tear the ship apart plank by plank, and he could not board her save by the cripple's permission. At last he nodded his bare head.

"I will come with ye, Vargo. 'Tis indeed kind of ye. But haste ye, for I am filled with impatience an' anxiety. To your house, then, my friend."

Back to Vargo's house they went, passed through the shop and entered a comfortless, almost bare room that was gloomy, dingy and oppressive. In the centre of the

uncovered floor was a small, dirty table with the scraps of a meal yet upon it. The remaining furniture consisted of two creaky old oak chairs. A door at the other end of the room guarded some mysterious region. It was the first time John had been in Vargo's house, and he at once felt its dreariness, cheerlessness and depression. He pitied the lonely old man his drab existence, for were it not for the lively birds in the shop the place might well be a prison. Vargo must have guessed John's thoughts.

"Ah, Master Steele, 'tis a lowly, poor habitation, but, then, I be but a simple old man with few wants and no earthly desires," he whispered. "But sit ye down on that chair whilst I fetch the good ale. 'Tis my one extravagance, be a drop of good, strong, bitter ale."

He went into the room beyond, and presently John heard the liquor gurgling and splashing. He felt very grateful to this benevolent old man for his interest and hospitality.

"Now," said Vargo, when he placed the ale on the table, "drink it down, for we must not tarry overlong. Good blessings be upon ye, Master Steele."

John finished his draught quickly, for he was very thirsty. Vargo took longer and smacked his lips over the ale.

"Vargo, 'tis a right good ale," said John. "But 'tis as bitter as ever I tasted. Very good an' strong it be, for already it makes me devilish drowsy."

"'Tis the reaction of the day's strenuous shock and excitement," hissed Vargo in reply. "But 'tis good ale, very good ale. Now, Master Steele, give me your attention."

"Aye, Vargo, my attention—'tis curst sleepy I feel so suddenly. Your plan, now. . . ." John yawned widely. The lids of his eyes felt like leaden covers.

"'Tis simple, Master Steele. I'll get ye another sup——"

"No . . . no . . . no more," muttered John. "I——I be listening. . . ."

Vargo's voice was so faint, the merest whisper at an

infinite distance. He talked on and on. The room was strangely dark. John suddenly discovered that he was unable to move his limbs. Vargo appeared to be discussing a plan, but the listener had not the slightest idea of what was said. He was conscious of a peculiar numbness creeping over him, a deep, lethargic apathy that deadened the senses. The sight was leaving his eyes. He could just hear Vargo's voice. The old man himself seemed to rise from his chair and float midway between floor and ceiling. His kindly old face was unaccountably altered. It appeared to be twisted and distorted until it resembled the face of a fiend. In a little while John fell forward on the table.

"I—I be—surely—drunk," he whispered. "Marie . . . is that . . . Marie?"

"Nay, good sir; not drunk, but drugged," Vargo smilingly informed him. But John did not hear the words. He was at last insensible. "'Tis Annie's clever drug. 'Tis quick and sure, Master Steele. Aye, ye be destined to discover how sure. But ye'll not be lonely long. There be three children coming to see Vargo's birds ere long. Three pretty little girls they be. 'Tis the last thing they shall see for a while, for they shall go with ye to join the others. Five pounds apiece do I get for them, and maybe ten for ye. When ye awake in several days ye'll have good cause to remember Vargo, for then ye'll be in the cage, deep down in the bowels of a plantation hell-ship bound for the Indies. But for ye, your pretty Marie would now be on her way there."

With a deftness that spoke of long practice, he gagged and trussed his victim with rope brought from the hidden room. Then he dragged the unconscious man to where a trap in the floor opened to disclose a flight of stone steps leading down into darkness. Down this steep incline he hauled his burden until he reached the damp floor of the cellar.

"Lie ye there," he hissed. "Lie ye there, Master Steele,

where so many have lain before starting their last long voyage. I will come for ye later—huh! Ha! ha! ho! hs-s-s-s-s-s! They never come back—they never come back in this life—hs-s-s-s! Ho! ho! huh! hs-s-s-s-s-s!"

Vargo laughed his hissing, spluttering laugh as he contemplated his handiwork. He laughed and laughed, and when at last he ascended the steps, secured the trap, and passed through into the shop, he laughed again.

"Aye, my pretty pets," said he, apostrophizing the shrieking, whistling, chattering birds, "they be all enemies of poor Vargo. But Vargo strikes back—huh! hs-s-s-s-s! He strikes back and destroys, for is he not the chosen instrument of the Lord?" He was gripped by another fit of immoderate, sibilant laughter. "Aye, men, women, and little children be all spawn of the evil one. Blessed be the Lamb, for he has chosen Vargo to—huh! hs-s-s-s-s-s! to punish and destroy these sons and daughters of Apollyon —ho! ho! hs-s-s-s-s-s!"

Still laughing, he strode to the door and gazed complacently at the smoking ruins of John Steele's home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

At the close of the third day of her sojourn on Balsamo's ship, Marie confessed to herself that her mind was a prey to restlessness and unfathomable longing; and her heart a reliquary wherein were incomprehensible impulse, regret, and tender hope. At every turn she faced the mirror of the past. Terrible and haunting were the images she saw in that dark glass, the most pitiful of all being the broken form and white, twitching face of Guiseppe Balsamo. What a story that had been! How simply and quietly he had told it. How gently he had passed over her guilt and shame. Ah, poor Guiseppe! And she had wept.

She had been afraid, terrified; but now she no longer feared this compassionate man, this gentle lover who had paid in suffering unthinkable for his love and constancy. Could she fear those mildly beaming eyes that ever sought her own? Could she dread the smile of sympathy and abiding love that curved his lips? Or shrink from the touch of his eager, trembling hand? Could she again lash him with the merciless scourge of indifference? Such cruelty!

But to return his love was another matter. She could not do that, for there was John—blunt, honest, earnest John, who had brought her back from death to life, who had held her in his strong arms, who had enfolded her in the love and protection of his clean, manly heart. Ah, yes; there was John. He was love and life to her. He was the love of her life. But why did he not come to her? Guiseppe had told her that the book-shop and dwelling had been destroyed by fire; but where was John? Guiseppe had said he did not know. She wondered.

The light of the sunset struck in through the cabin windows and set the polished table, the thick, plate glass upon it, and the appointments of silverware and crystal gleaming and burning in the bright, crimson-yellow rays. A shaft glowed upon the purple turban of Sala, who stood silent and watchful while Marie, Balsamo, and Panizzi refreshed themselves at the table. The Nubian's face was expressionless, but his black eyes glittered as they swept from his master to the woman whose aureate hair was so like the glowing nimbus of the dying, golden sun. When Panizzi rose from the table and left the cabin, Sala followed him.

"Sala," said Panizzi, as they leaned together on the bulwark and stared down the grey river, "didst thou see she weareth the master's gifts—his jewels and pearls, and the dress of cloth of silver? She hath discarded the apparel given her by the shopkeeper."

"Uhuh!"

"Can it be that Guiseppe still loves her? What are thy thoughts?"

"The master's love is as deep as the deep above us, as constant as the stars that dwell therein. Such a man is he. For ever and for ever will he love that woman, for so is he fashioned. He hath known hate, but what is his hate beside his love? His love will endure until he is no more."

"It surely passeth a man's understanding."

"Uhuh!" said Sala. "It taketh but little to pass thine, O hairless one."

"Black beast!" snarled Panizzi. He moved away, grumbling and rubbing his head.

"Uhuh!" agreed Sala the imperturbable.

There was silence in the cabin. Marie looked up to see Balsamo smiling at her. In answer to his a little smile played about her lips. Yet the longing in his eyes troubled her. She spoke quickly.

"Guiseppe, I fear for John," she said. "Think you that evil has befallen him?"

His countenance became grave. He looked down, but did not speak.

"Guiseppe, you do not reply," she said tremulously.

"Life and death are the gifts of God," he said slowly. "And yet I could almost wish that——"

"Ah, Guiseppe!" cried Marie. "I cannot believe that."

"Marie," said he, lifting his eyes to hers, "I would not now harm the Englishman. But a little while ago there was hate in my heart for him—and for you. Nay, do not start, my sweet love. Be at peace and listen to my words. Hate has risen in my heart again and again. Fearful temptation has prompted me and urged me to awful thoughts and deeds. But my love for you has ever conquered these malign impulses. I ask for no more of life than to have you beside me, to look upon your loveliness, and to comfort my soul with the nearness of your presence.

In all the fair valleys of the world's fair women you stand apart for me like a tall, glorious, splendid flower, the beauty and fragrance of which draws and holds my eyes and heart. Ever in my heart is the echo of your footsteps, of your sweet laugh, and of your caressing voice. Can you not glimpse what I have suffered in spirit as well as in body when you were gone from me—ah! That was not intended for a blow, for I love you too deeply to fill your eyes with tears and pain. But what yearning, what inexpressible longing possessed my soul! How, under the pale moon and the cold, bright stars, I prayed that God might restore you to me! How, in storm and sunshine, in wind and in rain, in clear daylight and in dark, impenetrable night, I have kept you in my heart and loved the memory of you. Could any man love you more? If so, then surely is my love a poor thing, a mere selfish desire. But passion alone could not endure what my love has so gladly and triumphantly borne for you. Marie, I love you more than life itself, more than it is in my poor power to express. I love you. Am I doomed to go forth alone? Ah, my beloved! I could not endure that. I could not again face life with only a memory, a cruel brain-shadow to ever walk beside me. Speak to me, Marie. Tell me that I do not plead . . . in vain. Do not cast me into a pit from which I shall never return. Once I looked into that black, resounding abyss, and then turned, shuddering, from the brink. Nay, nay, do not weep. Do not be distressed. But I plead for hope; I plead for love and you; I plead for life. . . ."

"Guiseppe—Guiseppe!" cried Marie piteously. "Do not speak so! I cannot bear it! I am all too unworthy of your wonderful love—too vain, selfish, and despicable to have so glorious a mantle draped about me. Ah, no, Guiseppe! What would I not give to atone, to heal your poor, bruised heart and tortured body! But my love is not like your love. I cannot—I cannot—ah! God has given me a face and body that men call beautiful! Yet,

alas, He has given me a heart corrupt, sensual, and little. It must be so! I am not fit to receive any man's pure love, for mine is not a pure heart. Bitterly, oh, so bitterly am I now conscious of how my warped nature is fashioned. I am not worthy to grovel at your feet, Guiseppe, or to be the recipient of your love and the love of John Steele. I should have gone down and down, fallen lower and lower, become the pretty plaything of drunken debauchees, the toast, the sport, the curse, of bestial men. But, no! I have risen to become the curse, the torment, perhaps the death of good men. Guiseppe . . . do not love me, I implore, I beseech! Think not of me. My love must ever hurt you, crush you, damn you. Let not your thoughts dwell upon me, for I have not the heart of even . . . Magdalene. . . ."

Balsamo sighed. The expression on his averted face was one of profound sorrow. It was a true reflection of the sadness within his heart.

"Do you love John Steele, Marie?" he softly asked.

She glanced quickly at him. Never again would she wound him. Falteringly she replied:

"I—I am not sure, Guiseppe."

"Ah," he breathed.

"Guiseppe, you see the woman I am?" she continued hurriedly, fiercely. "I do not know the meaning of love. Too late, now, to wish that I had died."

But Guiseppe Balsamo was not deceived. He rose slowly from his chair and limped to her side.

"It is all with God," he said simply.

"Guiseppe . . ." she whispered.

"Come, Marie; let us ascend to where the air is cool and redolent of the fragrance of river, meadow and garden. Will you assist a feeble cripple?"

"Yes—yes! I will do anything—willingly—gladly—to help you, Guiseppe," she panted.

He nodded.

They stepped from the cabin in time to see a West Indiaman glide slowly by on the outgoing tide.

"How peaceful it looks," said Marie. "It is a pretty sight. See the little men unfurling the great sails! They droop and flutter and flirt with the pursuing wind. See the black hull at the waterline, the broad, blood-red line from stem to stern through which peep the guns, the high castles at each end of the ship, freshly painted and crowded with men? Is it not a peaceful scene?"

"Yes; but under that serenity lies a fierce and rapacious character. Most of these ships are something else beside merchantmen. Judging by the tiers of guns on that craft, it is no exception."

"I do not understand——"

"Piracy," he replied. "A stern chase, an overwhelming assault, and then fire and the sword to wipe out all traces of the deed. Ships vanish and are seen no more. All are not swallowed by the elements, but many by the voracious maws of other ships."

"But is not that contrary to the laws of nations?"

"What is written on paper is written. Nevertheless, it is almost a universal practice, or trade, and there are few that at favourable times do not indulge in it. But I have something grave and important to tell you. At first I evaded your question, but now I must enlighten you. This morning I received a letter from Vargo——"

"Vargo? Concerning John?" Her voice trembled with eagerness.

"Yes," he replied, and then looked away.

"Tell me, Guiseppe——"

"Marie, he is . . . dead. Vargo saw his body."

Marie stared at the passing merchantman with unseeing eyes. Horror chilled her blood and held her motionless.

"Dead . . . ? It . . . it cannot be," she whispered with lips grey and quivering. "John . . . dead? It cannot be!"

In silence they stood and watched the vessel until it crept round the Isle of Dogs and vanished.

"Marie," said Balsamo very gently, "we, too, sail down the river and away within the hour. There is nothing, now, to keep us here. No, nothing. By the morning's light we should have the wind behind us and a bright sea slipping by."

She did not reply.

From below came those strange, coughing, rasping sounds that at odd intervals penetrated every part of the ship. Balsamo listened until they ceased.

"Panizzi shall not see the fight he craved to witness," he said. "Sala's leopards have been baulked of their prey. Another has taken vengeance upon him."

"You mean?" asked Marie dully. She was weeping silently.

"Castlehaven. He is upon yonder merchantman. In the days to come he will face worse than the teeth of Sala's leopards. Did you speak, Marie?"

"Dead . . . dead! He is gone, Guiseppe . . . John . . . ah, alas, alas!" Again the ever-changing tide of emotion swept through her. She turned impulsively to the cripple. "Guiseppe—you would protect me? You would not see me abandoned and cast aside? . . ."

Balsamo took her hand in his.

"Marie," he said, "I grieve for your distress. But it could not be shown more clearly, my beloved, that you and I were destined by heaven to walk life's path together. You have come back to me. Truly have the prayers and faith of Guiseppe Balsamo been answered. My gratitude goes up to God!"

Marie Pleyel's beautiful head nodded thoughtfully. Her shoulders shrugged almost imperceptibly. Again were her eyes narrowed and her lips hard. She turned away and left the merchant standing silent and alone.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JOHN STEELE wondered why the man beside him laughed. It was such a bitter laugh, and it was oddly, strangely familiar. Then his numbed brain began to speculate upon the identity of his companion. Hours passed in this futile essay, dreary hours, pregnant with half-formed memories and resolutions. He became aware that there were other men near him, but so dark was it that only when a form moved, or murmured, laughed, blasphemed or wept, did he notice it.

The whole thing was so extraordinary and baffling that more than once he decided he was still in the grip of a drunken sleep, and that these dim objects about him that groaned and cursed and pleaded so pitifully were the phantoms of that alcoholic stupor. Several times he had patiently waited for his mind to rid itself of its gloomy obsessions and awaken to see the kindly, concerned face of Mark Vargo. He remembered with remarkable clarity the draught of ale and Vargo's attempt to outline a plan to him. But after that came a blank, a deep insensibility, and then the uncanny experience of returning consciousness. Even now, as he looked about him, everything was so blurred, so vague and indistinct—like the dim vision of a swimmer under dark water searching with open eyes the black shades of the hidden sea-bottom.

He felt the surface of the floor whereon he lay. It was of rough wood, damp wood, that exhaled a sickly tang unlike anything he had previously known. Furthermore, he was surprised to discover that the floor was unstable and moved in a most mysterious manner. There were moments when it pressed against his body, then it would appreciably ease the pressure and his frame would incline slightly, as though about to roll downward. Perhaps, he reflected, his impressions were erroneous and the cries, sobs, laughter

and movement were but the wild fancies of his disordered senses.

What, at first, perplexed him most was the fact that except for a narrow covering of cloth round his loins he was naked. Who had presumed to strip him of his clothes? Why had his garments been taken from him? But his stupid head would furnish no answer. When, finally, he heard the distressed wailing of a child he was sure that he heard, saw and felt only through the medium of horrific, fantastic hallucination. He groaned, for his head and limbs ached most acutely.

"Ha!" said the voice of the man beside him. "So at last you have recovered your wits! Sink me! I began to think you would have the privilege of being the first corpse."

John raised himself to a sitting posture and held his hands to his throbbing head.

"Then I be awake," he replied faintly. "I thought I dreamed most horribly."

"Ah!" said the voice. "The most cruel dream would be sweet compared with this awakening."

"But where be Vargo?"

"Vargo? Were you last with Vargo?"

"Aye, we drank ale together."

"'Tis the last you will taste in this life, my friend."

"The last? Why?" demanded John. "Why speak you so portentously, so prophetically?"

"Have you no conception of your present place, condition and plight?" the hard voice asked.

"I be fair dazed—stupid—mazy! I cannot think—I cannot even see clearly."

"That you cannot see is easily explained. We are deep down in the black hull of a West Indiaman——"

"A ship . . . ?" cried John, his lassitude swiftly vanishing. "But how came I to be on a ship? What does it all mean?"

"It means that you and the rest of us—men, women and children—are no longer free, but are slaves doomed to a life that is worse than death."

"A slave!" ejaculated John. At first his amazement checked his anger. Then the hot blood became chilled in his veins. "A slave? But 'tis impossible! I was with Mark Vargo——"

"Precisely. He is naught but a body-snatching old ruffian. Both he and the she-devil, Annie Sissmins, live by the foul trade."

"But—the bird-shop? The stall in Paul's Walk?"

"Are a pretence. Not even the devil hates mankind so bitterly as Mark Vargo and Annie Sissmins, the former on account of his mutilations, and the latter because of the price she paid for beauty and for youth. They are a cunning, unscrupulous, soulless pair of ghouls that feed their hatred and their greed by drugging and otherwise securing their victims. They must be passing rich on the proceeds."

"Were ye kidnapped by them? Whoever ye be, ye seem to be well acquainted with the pair," remarked John.

"No. For hours at a stretch I have racked my brains for a solution, but all to no purpose. I know how this thing was done, but the plotter behind it all is unknown to me. But have we met in the past? It seems I have heard your voice before. What is your name?"

"It be John Steele——"

"'Sdeath!" came the explosive interruption. Then followed silence. Then, at last, came that low, bitter laugh.

"For why do ye laugh at my name?" inquired John. He peered through the darkness in a vain attempt to discern the features of the man that laughed.

"I but laughed at the part of it," was the cryptic answer.

"Ye speak in riddles," retorted John, rather nettled at such evasion.

"Now that all is indeed lost I have a mind to tell you the rest of your name——"

"Rot me! Ye need not trouble," growled John. "I perceive ye to be greatly mistaken. John Steele be the only name I've ever known."

"But Nathaniel Baxter knew you had another."

"Ah! Then ye do know me. Who be ye?"

"My name is William Roland," was the cold reply.

"It means naught to me. I, too, thought we had met. How come ye to be so well versed in my affairs?"

"I did not know you existed until the day we met in Paul's Walk. After that I inquired concerning you. What I subsequently discovered dazed me, shocked me so that I was like a lifeless man. But there can be no mistake."

"'Tis the buzzing in my poll. I wish it would stop. When did I meet ye in Paul's Walk?"

"When you trod so clumsily on my shoe at the stall of Annie Sissmins——"

"Castlehaven! You!" gasped John. He slowly struggled to his feet as he asked himself what amazing events had struck the Earl down and thrown him into this black, noisy pit.

"At your service—*my lord,*" returned the other with the same grating laugh.

"Don't 'my lord' me, ye dog!" snarled John, lurching weakly as he strove to balance himself. "Up on your feet an' we'll finish the thing that be between us."

"Your lordship had better sit down before you fall down. I cannot see you too plainly, but your dim shadow looks none too steady——"

"Will ye cease mocking me?" cried John furiously.

"I do not mock you. The title is your right," was the startling reply.

"Faugh! What madness has seized your brain——"

"Many weeks ago I asked myself the same question. I

had meant to kill you, to set my bullies on you for the scene in Paul's Walk. But your name preserved you."

"What be my name, then?" asked John wonderingly. There was no mistaking the earnestness of Castlehaven's tone.

"Nothing matters now that we are both condemned to a living death, so I'll tell you. Your name is John Steele Roland."

"Roland? Roland . . . ? Why, that be your name——"

"It is our name. I leave you to conclude what it means and all that it implies. You are some eighteen months older than I. A devilish piquant—in fact, a damnably pungent situation, isn't it?"

"You mean to tell me that I be the Earl of Castlehaven? That you be my brother—you?" John was trembling with anger at this paltry deception, this foolish, futile attempt to ridicule him. "If I thought ye spoke the truth I could wish my heart to be torn out. I'd hate to be of the same blood as ye—foundling though I be! Faugh! 'Tis a putrid stream!"

"Forgive me for being sententious, but the noblest rivers are fed by turbid streams. It matters not to me whether you believe me or not. I hate you—most deeply! But if you have a grain of intelligence left—which I doubt—you must see that I speak the truth. The mere fact that you are alive to hear these words is sufficient refutation of falsehood on my part. I would have had you killed but for the lamentable fact that you are a Roland. But what matters it? We are both doomed, and with us the earldom. We are destined to rot, perhaps side-by-side, across the water. So, you see, we are prevented by our unfortunate blood relationship from settling the matter that lies between us."

"'Tis damnable!" John burst out moodily. "But still I do not believe ye. I think ye are a pitiful jester, an' as great a liar as ye are a rogue."

"That *is* deplorable, my dear brother——"

"Hold! Not that name! No brothers are we!"

"You overlook the way t'was said. I fear you will ever be dull witted. But in one particular you wrong me. Two virtues do I claim. I have never stolen—unless it be a woman—and, to the best of my belief, I have never lied. There have been a few wild, reckless Rolands, but to theft and to lies, I believe, none has ever descended."

"'Tis poor comfort ye must gain from that. A Roland! Bah! I'd rather have remained a nameless man than be one of them!"

"That is ignorance speaking. You are judging the standards of all Rolands by what you know mine to be and have been. In that you err. There are men and women of our line of whom you may be justly proud. 'Tis the same in most families—if not in all."

"A Roland!" muttered John again.

"Alas, yes! But I doubt you would prove to be an acquisition even were Fate to permit you to live. You are neither good nor bad, and the Rolands have ever been one or the other. 'Tis true you have never had much in the way of opportunity—or the devil only knows which way you would have twisted. Christ! How I hate you . . . my—dear—brother!"

"How did ye uncover all this?" inquired John, settling himself down against the upright iron bars of the huge cage in which he and the rest of the men were confined.

"It matters not," was the gloomy reply. "But it is the truth."

"Ye will not tell me?"

"Beyond telling you that our mother was distantly connected to that old earthworm, Nathaniel Baxter, I will not. I would not have told you this much but for the sure death that awaits us both. 'Twas by a stroke of ill-fortune that I stumbled on the truth. You would never have known. It was never intended that you, the first

born, should succeed. Oh, do not ask me why, for 'twould take a week to relate the intricate details of domestic strife, of hateful accusation and scornful, proud denial that ensued after you were born. Why I did not destroy the papers I know not—perhaps because the penned words spoke with the half-remembered, sweet voice of the long dead. But 'tis all carefully, exactly written, and reposes securely in the care of my man of law. Even then the thing goes deeper than that."

"How long have we been in this black, hideous prison?"

"For three days you have lain like a dead man."

"Have ye any notion as to our whereabouts?"

"My experience of the sea tells me that we must be ploughing the Channel."

"How can ye know that?"

"This ship is headed for the West Indies. A few hours after I was stripped and thrown all but naked into this deep, iron-ringed hole, I felt the vessel rise and fall as she rode the waves. She is now on even keel, telling of a falling wind. Hear you that gentle slapping and thudding? 'Tis the dying waves against the sides and bow. Hear you that slight creaking and cracking? 'Tis the complaining of the mainmast that goes down to the keel close by. Hear you that soft rumbling above us? 'Tis the roped guns on their carriages. But the cries and lamentations you hear around us is the despair of the other slaves."

"'Tis monstrous!" John cried hoarsely.

"Yet, strange to relate, it has only impressed us as being so since we have fallen victims. 'Tis nothing new, and I confess I looked upon the practice as a convenient method of disposing of the rabble. It has now occurred to me that the kidnapper wields a two-edged sword. 'Sblood! I would like to know who betrayed me into the hands of the Philistines. You can blame the cripple, but I——"

"The cripple?"

"Tush, yes! I marvel at your denseness. Vargo was in Balsamo's pay."

"But I had not offended the cripple," John protested.

"Zounds! but you are thick! Were you not with his woman? Do you imagine he thinks you guiltless there? In truth you amaze me."

"But it cannot be——"

"Where is the woman?"

"Vargo said she went with Balsamo——"

"Ah! And where are you?"

John did not answer. It seemed to him that the pitiful sobbing, the cries, the occasional moan of anguish, the deep, harsh curse, all combined to form a miserable reply.

"I heard the cripple say your man, Snoop, was also in his pay," muttered John.

"Snoop? That toad! Well, stab me!"

"It may have been he——"

"No, not Snoop! He may have taken the cripple's gold, but the fellow was too attached to me to even contemplate such a thing as this. No, it certainly was not Snoop. He was a faithful dog. Humph . . . Snoop . . . but, tush! It could not be . . . humph!"

"What is to become of us?"

"We shall be worked to death under a pitiless sun and a still more relentless lash. That much is assured. More than that I know not."

"And the women?"

"Need you ask that? You will observe later when the food and light are admitted that there are no hags or aged crones amongst them."

"And the little children?"

"I know not. Sink me! Do you think me familiar with the methods of slave-drivers and rascally plantation-owners?"

"Ye seem to be acquainted with most forms of evil," retorted John.

"And I have had some fair companions in my day," was the quick, sneering reply.

"Ye blackguard!" rasped John. The thrust of the man that claimed to be his brother made him wince. He half-rose, as though to wreak swift vengeance upon his tormentor. William Roland heard, rather than saw, the weak effort.

"Oh, be still," he said wearily. "Your petty virtue and innocence are more nauseous than my evil deeds. Let it suffice us both that the cripple has emerged triumphant. Settle down and sleep—if this noisy, foul, stinking darkness will permit it. Dream, if you will, of dark-eyed women—women with red-gold hair! Yes, sleep and dream of unattainable happiness . . . my—dear—brother!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

To the wretched prisoners cooped in the two great iron cages, deep down in the foul darkness of the merchantman, there was little to enable them to distinguish between day and night; yet when night came sure instinct urged them to become quieter and gratefully seek the slumber that brought temporary release from their misery, their memories and their pain. Sleep! That blessed tranquillity that rendered them oblivious of their dreadful condition, of the thudding of the waves against the stout walls of ribbed timber, of the nauseating stench that filled their nostrils, of the crawling, cunning rats that crept forth from their holes and corners in search of food. By day the cries of the victims rent the darkness, but by night a fitful silence brooded on the platform.

The two cages, each about twelve feet square, were erected on a temporary deck or platform built immediately above the leaping, rushing, evil-smelling bilge-water.

Between them was a space of several feet that formed a passage, at the end of which rough steps led up to a trap, or hatch, in the gun-deck overhead.

Late in the afternoon of the fourth day at sea the hatch-cover above the steps was removed to admit the seamen who brought the daily ration of food and water. A faint light fell on the platform and revealed the miserable scene. John Steele Roland gazed for a space in silence at the sullen, lowering features of his brother; then he looked at the seven other occupants of the cage, who received the coarse food that was thrust at them through the bars. He took his portion and commenced to eat ravenously. William Roland sneered at the food, but also ate it. From the despondent, drooping, bearded, half-naked men John's glance shifted to where the clamouring women were secured behind the strong bars. He counted them and found that there were eight. Not one appeared to be over thirty years of age, and one timid, cowering, blue-eyed, dark-haired girl did not look more than seventeen. She was very beautiful, even in her distress and wretchedness, and John looked at her for a longer time than he did at the others. He drew a swift comparison between this girl and her companions, three of whom were brazen women that vociferously offered their charms in exchange for the doubtful amenities of life in the great cabin under the poop. He could not help wondering what soulless creature had condemned this young woman to a life of slavery and degradation, what story of grasping treachery lay behind her betrayal. The women were almost as scantily clad as the men, but only the timid, dark-haired girl seemed sensitive on this point. John concluded that it was the practice of kidnappers to sell their victims' clothes as well as their bodies. In the women's cage were three little girls between ten and fourteen years of age. They were ragged, terrified and bewildered, and cried incessantly for their parents.

The vessel was almost becalmed, and because of this

the burly, red-bearded officer who accompanied the seamen busied himself in opening the two small ports, one on each side of the ship, high up near the overhead deck. More light was admitted, and with it fresh, fog-laden air. The stream of air flowed across the two cages and enabled the prisoners to breathe it deeply into their choked lungs. For a few precious minutes the ports were open while the seamen dipped for sea-water and swilled it across the reeking platform. Then the officer, amid the howls and execrations of both men and women, closed and barred them.

"Aye, howl, ye filth!" the fellow said in reply. "In but a little while ye'll have the greater cause."

As he walked towards the steps one of the seamen whispered to him. The words caused him to pause and turn.

"Sink me!" he growled, casting searching glances at the women. "I had forgotten. Now which of these wenches —ho! There be the one to please him—aye, that one! Haul her out o' this kennel and take her to his cabin. Come, blue eyes! The master awaits ye——"

The despairing cries of the young, dark-haired woman rang poignantly as she writhed and struggled in the grip of the seamen. Through the unlocked door of the cage they forced her and towards the steps. Her screams sent icy chills through John's blood, and he turned his eyes away so that he might not see her futile struggles. He could not aid her, even though his rage urged him to rise and endeavour to tear the strong iron bars apart.

"It be hell," he muttered thickly.

"It is," agreed William Roland.

"I wonder your conscience does not lash ye—ye—bah! I cannot think of a word low enough to fit ye!" John snarled.

There was no reply.

But even as the men were about to lift the girl through

the opening a rough voice bawled down at them:

"Aloft wi' ye! There be a fight on hand! A rich, foreign prize or I be a lousy Dutchman! An' the fog will aid us to surprise them, rake them, loot them, an' then sink them to cover the business. To it, now! Toss the wench back into the cage. She'll make the merrier sport later."

The girl was hurriedly thrust back into the cage. She collapsed on to the damp planks and sobbed as though her heart would break. Then the men ran up the steps and the dim light vanished as they slammed down the cover and shot the bolt.

"That was the worthy captain himself," said William Roland. "As ill-looking a brute as ever I gazed upon. So there is to be a fight. 'Twould be merciful if a ball sent us all to a quick death."

John looked across in the direction of the girl. He could not see her, but her sobbing rang in his ears.

"Aye, it would," he agreed. "May God pity us all——"

"God . . . ?" His brother laughed cynically.

"An' why not God?" John rapped out.

"Faugh! Why not any other nonsense? Christ and Christianity! A pretty tale of an ideal, but not of reality. Can a man love the abstract? Can he, day by day, warmly love a cold, baffling supposition that is disguised as love because of his craven fear of death? And what is death but the falling of the leaf? What are we but leaves that live, and fall, and perhaps touch as we fall? Falling leaves! To youth, perhaps, death is a cheat, but to the aged, the suffering and those incurable, death is the kindest thing in life. Those priestly rascals, with their terrifying cant, are the cruellest tormentors with which we are accursed! Man's very fear of the unknown, a fear born of primeval horror, is their unfailing lever. God! How He has tortured the brains of men! Men do not cry unto God because of their love for Him, but because of their fear. Faugh! Poor, falling leaves!"

"Ye fool——"

"Rot me! There is a pale-faced youth in this cage that cried unceasingly unto his God until exhaustion silenced him. And for his pains he was cursed by the others and rewarded from above with a sore throat. Ask him. Tush! I might have known such a simpleton would not outgrow such childish fancies as pixies, gnomes, witches—and gods."

"Ye mocker! Who be ye to set yourself up to question the Almighty? Ye that crawl in the filth of the world! Merciful an' compassionate though He be, I verily believe ye to be an offence in His sight——"

"Merciful and compassionate?" again William Roland sneered. "'Tis well, my preaching brother, that the darkness is about us. 'Tis the gloom that is merciful."

"Aye, to the bat the gloom be light an' the light darkness. Ye be just as foul an' ill-constituted——"

Again he was interrupted.

"Pshaw! Fool! Simpleton! Was it God that preserved the wench a moment ago? Was it God that snatched her body from the intended embrace of that brute above us?"

"Aye, but it was," said John firmly.

"Zounds! but you amaze me!" muttered William Roland. "Then indeed must I think myself privileged. Your God shows a nice sense of discrimination——"

"Harken—ye blasphemer! Speak so again an' I vow I'll kill ye where ye lie. And not even the blood that is ours shall stop me."

"No doubt you would rejoice in the excuse, my potential Cain," retorted the other. "It is a habit of godly men to kill for their God. But I will not offend your delicate sensibility further. 'Tis poor sport to torment an idiot—and you are surely that! But if 'tis fight you crave, I shall be devilish happy to accommodate you—if only to relieve this curst monotony——"

William Roland's sardonic voice was silenced by the

sudden roar of the guns on the deck above. The recoil of the cannon sounded to those beneath as though the deck were being pounded with mighty hammers. The crashing of the single guns higher up, the testing of the culverins on forecastle and poop, and the ear-splitting detonation of the lower broadside told those in the iron cages that the battle had begun. The deck quivered under the leaping, thudding guns; the ribbed side of the vessel vibrated with the shock and shook the platform whereon the captives huddled in the darkness. Faintly to their anxious ears came hoarse cries and commands and the rat-tat-tat of running feet.

"'Tis begun," shouted William Roland. "Our pirate crew has lifted the lid of hell."

"I hear it," replied John.

"Then may we all go to the devil quickly, for 'tis unlikely to be an English craft we are attacking. I'd rather see the bottom of the sea than the inside of a French dungeon or a pestilence-ridden plantation hut."

"I doubt not ye'll get your desire," said John gruffly. "Where do you think we be——"

His voice was lost in the resounding, deafening gunfire. Then came the first retaliatory shot. The ball burst through the timbers just above and aft of where they lay with a rending, tearing, cracking noise that was instantly followed by bitter curses and shrill screams of agony. Now, indeed, did terror grip and claw at the hearts of the women, the children, and most of the men in the cages. They screamed and shrieked, and some few prayed. Another shot struck the vessel and was followed by a loud crash and cries of dismay. The ship shuddered and rolled heavily. Then came the faint, frantic chopping of axes.

"A mast," shouted William Roland.

"I hear it," said John again.

"Our rascally captain has caught a wasp."

"Aye, so it seems."

"Why do you not follow the example of the youth in the corner? I hear him babbling and blubbering prayers as fast as he can think of them," came the taunt.

"I be praying," replied John calmly.

"Do not forget me . . . my—dear—brother!" said the bitter voice.

"Aye, even for ye," was the reply.

"Well . . . stab me!" gasped William Roland. "Upon my twisted soul, I know not whether to loathe you—or admire you. Sink me!"

Then he was silent, for, owing to the increasing din of battle, speech was difficult to employ. Broadside after broadside was fired by the guns above. Again and again the splintering, rending shot from the other vessel racked and rocked the ship. Sometimes it jumped with the impact as though in sudden agony. Shouts of the living, screams of the wounded and dying, and horrible, confused noises came down from above with the acrid smoke of burnt powder. In the darkness of the cages, penned in with certain death, the maddened prisoners moaned and shrieked in their frenzy. Impotently their bleeding hands tore and beat at the unyielding iron bars. Their shocked imaginations pictured, felt and endured death by cannon-shot, by sword and by deep, black water. They had no hope. Penetrating the harsher sounds like the shrill wailing of violins in an infernal symphony of death were the thin, plaintive cries of the children. The dark-haired girl prayed quietly for death.

"'Tis a miserable way to die!" John suddenly burst out. "Trapped and exterminated like we were vermin. Oh, for a last sight of the light of God's day! Marie—oh, Marie, my dear love—my love! But God's will be done—even this cruel end to the only love of my life."

His voice was unheard in the swelling chorus of the guns. They were firing faster and faster, and the cannon of the opposing ship could now plainly be heard, proving

to the despairing listeners that the two ships were drawing nearer and nearer.

The death and deliverance came together. The ship reeled and shivered under the terrible cannonade of its adversary. A ball smashed the planking on the waterline that formed one side of the men's cage, whizzed through the iron bars and buried itself in the timber opposite. Two men and a women were stricken by it as it passed, but not even those beside them heard their death sobs and choked prayers. The water pouring in across their feet warned them of their dire peril, and awful were the cries that arose at the feel of its cold kiss.

"It is the end!" shouted William Roland. "And for that I could thank God, did I believe He existed."

John sighed and was about to reply, when something hard struck his legs. With a gasp he sensed what it was and quickly bent down to grasp it before it was washed through the bars and away. It was a length of stout, heavy planking, about six feet long, that had been torn from the ship's side by the shot.

"Say ye there be no God?" he raved at his brother. "Here be the direct answer to your blasphemy. A strong plank—a plank from God's own hand! Come, grip with me when I place it between the bars. Grip an' exert your strength to the utmost."

William Roland was instantly beside him. All round them was the pandemonium of hell itself. Above, were the hot, belching guns, rasping, coughing, jumping, thundering, but not as fast or as loudly as a few minutes before. Beside them were the shrill outcries of the doomed. Below them was the roaring of inrushing water.

Gasping, straining at the plank, heedless of sound and swirling water, the two men worked frantically to bend the iron bars so that they might pass through. Slowly the iron gave to the force exerted by the oak lever, wider and wider became the gap, until at last John pressed his

way through with a great shout of triumph. Quickly he splashed through the water to the steps, and it was but the work of a moment to destroy the covering of the hatch. The light streamed down upon the platform and dimly showed the white, twisted, staring, agonized faces of those who watched. He reassured the pleading women and children and once again applied the baulk of timber to the task of bending iron. Presently the gap in the women's cage was wide enough to allow them to escape.

Up the steps they madly fought their way, clawing, grasping and tearing at each other in their blind terror. But once upon the deck above they paused and grouped together in horrified consternation. The place was a charnel-house: half-naked, mangled, terribly-wounded bodies lay on the planks and across wrecked guns in the awkward, fantastic attitudes of sudden death. The ripped and splintered planks, the shattered gun-carriages and the riven walls were spattered and streaked with blood. Not half the guns were now in action, and the remaining seamen, although they served the ravenous monsters with red-hot shot and demoniac haste and energy, knew that victory was not for them. There was but death before them, so death they continued to send forth until the end. The lurid flashes of the enemy's guns could be seen winking wickedly through the grey-green fog without. Then came the crashing shock as the ball struck its mark. The smell of blood and powder was as sickening as the dreadful sight around them.

"Up—up!" shouted John. He bent and grasped an axe. The remainder of the men, and even some of the women, armed themselves with weapons taken from the dead. William Roland gripped a sword. His bold features were composed, even a little scornful, and he laughed softly as he gazed about him. Up the steps to the deck above raced the liberated prisoners. In their midst,

clinging to the scanty skirts of the women, were the three children.

Up past the middle gun-deck they climbed. They did not pause here, did not look upon the awful carnage. Only one blood-drenched gun roared its solitary defiance from this packed, dripping, crimson tomb, the shot-torn sides of which gaped wide and jagged.

The doomed vessel was slowly canting and settling in the water. The irruption of the implacable sea sealed the fate of the piratical West Indiaman. Other shots bored through the timbers at the scarlet water-line. The platform on which the cages stood was now well under water. Owing to the list of the ship the two remaining guns on the lowest deck were now firing into the sea, and presently the surviving seamen rushed up to the deck above. Here they feverishly tossed aside the slain and brought into action such guns as were serviceable and continued the fight with desperate, stubborn fury. Their one hope was that a lucky shot would find the magazine in the enemy's ship.

Through the drifting folds of the curtain of fog it was seen that the foreign craft had also been terribly punished. Her gun-fire was slackening: a sure indication that Death and his scythe had reaped a harvest among her devoted gun crews. There was very little wind, and the two ships were drifting along less than a cable's-length apart. Since the short, bitter fight began they had been pounding away at almost point-blank range. Terrible was the slaughter and destruction, the more fearful because each crew knew that no quarter would be asked or given.

The wreckage in the waist and on the smashed superstructures of the English ship was appalling, and was strewn about in such a way that those who had just escaped from the cages had to clamber over and under fallen spars, shot-riddled sails, smashed, overturned guns, broken, splin-

tered bulwarks and tangled rigging in their effort to reach the long boat which they saw still hanging from the blocks near the ruined forecastle. Some seamen had evidently planned to abandon the ship, for the boat was only a foot from the water, and in it were the crumpled bodies of four men, one of whom was the red-bearded officer who had selected the dark-haired girl for his master's pleasure. Doubtless their enraged comrades had shot them down when their design became plain.

Still the fight went on, but its fury was now greatly diminished. The spasmodic barking of the guns punctuated the piercing cries of agony, the pitiful moans and the unheeded entreaties of the wounded and dying. Here and there in the wreckage a man moved slightly or crawled across the heaps of dead in an attempt to reach the water-butts. But there were few living upon the deck and superstructures, for the chain shot from the foreign ship's guns had mown down those who at first escaped the balls from the smaller culverins.

"Down into the boat, my worthy brother," shouted William Roland. He laughed his soft, hateful laugh. "Throw out that carrion. Then help these squawking, screaming women——"

"No, you——"

"Fool! Do for once be intelligent. With this blade I am the equal of any three that may dispute our departure. You imperil the lives of these crazed people by your hesitancy. Down with you!" came the angry roar. "Make haste, else will the boat be smashed by the flying balls——"

A ball, the last shot fired by the foreign ship, screamed past as John clambered down the ropes. It struck the foremast. There came a sound of cracking, a rush of wind, and then a shrieking and crashing as the severed portion of the mast fell upon the bulwark in the midst of the group. John looked up. He could not see his brother. Then he

cut through the ropes and the boat hit the sea with a resounding splash.

"Down ye come!" he yelled. "Those that can swim, jump for it. There—there—young mistress! Do not sob so! The fight be over. Don't weep so, my poor girl—I vow I'll get ye justice an' we safely reach shore. There, now . . . back, that man! Back, I say! Now, now, little child—rest ye in the boat there. 'Tis all right now. William Roland, where be ye, man—"

"He be dead," croaked the pale-faced youth who stared down at John with eyes large and terror-haunted.

"Dead? Dead . . . ?" rasped John.

"Aye . . . his brains be on the plank beside him."

"Hold him up so that I may know 'tis true . . . aye! Merciful God! 'Tis horribly true! Rest his wild, unregenerate soul in peace! Come, now, the rest of ye! Come quick—the ship heels ominously—ye be the last?"

"Aye," said the pale-faced youth in his croaking voice. Then he broke down and sobbed convulsively.

"The oars now! Let us away! Push there . . . right! Now pull, else down we go with the ship—for Christ's sake pull! Bah—ye weaklings! Pull! Ah, that be better——"

"See . . . see!" suddenly screamed a woman, pointing towards the foreign ship. "The other one be on fire——"

"On fire? By God, 'tis so!" whispered a man. He paused to watch the rising flames.

"Pull, ye madman!" roared John. "If the flames touch the powder it will blow us out of the water!"

"They be lowering a boat, see? There 'tis! See the woman—see the little man in black being carried——"

"Pull! Pull! Pull!" snarled John.

"They be leaving the ship—they be afeared of us—they turn from us——"

"God! Will ye pull——"

. . . . . .

John did not again meet Marie Pleyel. The two boats drifted apart in the fog. Balsamo and Marie went in the direction of France. Castlehaven encouraged his weak, exhausted crew—including the strongest of the women—until all were safely landed at a village on St. Mary's, the largest of the Scilly Islands. Guiseppe and Marie were married in a little, grey-stone, moss-encrusted French church within a few hours of their arrival.

. . . . . .

The Countess of Castlehaven was many years younger than he. She was very beautiful, with rippling, lustrous, black, silky hair and wide, soft eyes of violet-blue—the pretty, dark-haired girl who was among those who escaped from the sinking West Indiaman.

Staff Bulletins
66 Macarthur Street,
Parramatta